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vol. 96
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santa clara review

since 1869

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contents

volume 96 number 2 spring/summer 2009

poetry

ori fienberg	1	The Case for Renting
jennifer schalliol	2	Cuttings à la Robert Hass
bridget gage-dixon	17	Calling John Murphy After Twenty Years
j. richard mclaughlin	19	Bagels
guiseppe getto	20	Future Draft
dan pinkterton	25	Whaling Museum
natalie giarratano	26	Hustle
andrea cleary	36	Play Therapy
erin bealmear	37	Freedom is a Big Wheel
kevin schmitt	40	November, 2008
andrei guruianu	41	The Election Party
krystal languell	43	From Fifty-Six Etymologies, No. Five
rebecca foust	61	Ethan Frome
isaac melum	67	What I Would Say To God
kristina chiapella	68	Oranges
maria terrone	69	The Gargoyles Rebel
doug ramspeck	79	Satan Mops the Floor at St. Charles Catholic Grade School
natalie haney tilghman	80	The Curator
lauren backes	86	Tides
yim tan wong	102	The Launch
eric tseng	103	Untitled

fiction

matt baker	3	Powerlessness
stacy m. tintocalis	28	Bill Suggs' Safe House
nancy alvarado	62	Saguaro
kristina chiapella	87	The Show
connor coyne	89	Dash Against Darkness

non-fiction

cara matsukane	22	Running in Circles
andrew perez	38	The Painful Truth
johanna mitchell		Lost and Found: Searching for Identity on the Streets of San Jose
jamie mccauley	81	Sleepless, Silent

art

kate bradley	45	Crayon
heather lynch	46	Untitled
susan felter	47	Western Stream
annamarie leon	48	Despite Uncertainty
irene kearney	49	Untitled
anamile quispe	50	A Woman's Vision
anamile quispe	51	A Woman's Vision (back)
courtney haney	52	Victoria Lucas
sarah beth goncarova	53	Tilt
daniel choe	54	Self-Portrait Bust
gary iribarren	55	River Boat Captain, Central Vietnam
veronica eng	56	Untitled
kristen rieke	57	Bees
kirsten muckler	58	Untitled
emily fong	59	Untitled
kirstin olson	60	Untitled

letter from the editor

The form of the literary journal at times seems a paradox: Printed every year, and often multiple times a year, each issue quickly archived in a dark room to begin work on the next, it is both temporal and everlasting; featuring work by artists yet unheard of as well as those well-known, it is both experimental and traditional; and cultivated by a staff that is constantly changing, it is forever in flux and yet a familiar standby.

Perhaps a more interesting way to look at the literary journal is to see it not for its contrasts but for its multiple identities and voices. Just as the journal may be one thing and another, occupying various spaces and speaking from varied perspectives, it unites multiple genres together in one form. Each story, poem, or work of art may speak with one voice, but set together in the journal, these individual voices engage in conversation, constantly affirming, questioning, and calling each other out in vibrant dialogue. Of course, one result of all these conversations is a new understanding of the parts that make the whole; and so the journal, perhaps more than other literary forms, encourages us to think, to re-think, and to never stop searching for new answers.

In this issue, we see that often there is no one right answer: From the heart-wrenching loss of a loved one, to the incomprehensible cycles of substance abuse and life on the streets, to the limits we place on ourselves that hold us so far back—even the creative mind cannot find a solution for these very real and very troubling situations. But perhaps there are lessons to be learned in the uncertainty.

As a final note, we're pleased to announce the return of the Editor's Choice Prize in this issue of *santa clara review*. The prize is awarded only when the editors agree a piece is exceptionally worthy of special recognition. Congratulations to Prize Winners Rebecca Foust for her poem "Ethan Frome," Anamile Quispe for her sculpture "A Woman's Vision," and Stacy M. Tintocalis for her story "Bill Suggs' Safe House." I would also like to thank this year's staff for all of their hard work and the untiring dedication they've shown throughout the year.

Our work is done, and we hand it over to you: Read, think, and think again.

We hope you enjoy the issue,

kelsey maher
and the editors of *santa clara review*

The Case for Renting

There was a house made of birds. Wood was needed for warmth and they lacked the funds for brick and mortar, but they had many nets and so each day they hauled in more birds.

It really took considerably fewer birds than they were expecting. Birds were very good insulation.

But every now and then the birds would fly off, and then when it rained flapping wings sprayed them. So they brought out the nets and hauled in more birds until the gaps were filled.

jennifer schalliol |

Cuttings à la Robert Hass

love apples:
good things come to those who
shake the good thing tree
not those who sit beneath
nobly waiting
to be Isaac Newtoned

Powerlessness

I told my boss I had a drug problem to save my job. Rumor at work had transformed from casual gossip to an established fact that I wouldn't be back after the first of the year. And since it was November 10th, I had to come up with something fast. It wasn't so much that my job performance had suffered, it was more the fact that my boss and I didn't get along. From what I've been told repeatedly by co-workers over lunch at Bubby's, he basically thought I was an asshole.

It was no secret that he was a dedicated recovery disciple who quit the boozing and using six years ago. He still regularly attends meetings and finds ways to spread the twelve-step gospel during company time. We all knew his story. It was his favorite thing to talk about.

After sitting down and thanking him for his time, I turned serious and tried to force out some tears to help lubricate the moment, but none came. I said, "There's something I need to tell you."

"Okay...?"

"I have a drug problem."

Then I detailed a fictitious background of how my use had escalated over the years – how it began with one Marlboro cigarette smoked in the living room of my best friend Thad's house, all the way to a three gram a day coke habit. I wasn't even sure if three grams was a lot for a daily coke habit. So I studied him carefully when I divulged this crucial detail, watching to see if he'd adjust his eyebrows or make an unusual involuntary movement. He nodded. I knew I was in the ballpark. I added, "Some days four or five grams."

I stayed away from putting any kind of monetary value on my habit. I've always heard people specify the severity of their addiction this way: I had a hundred dollar a day habit. I smoked two hundred dollars of rock a day. Thirty grand, up my nose. Poof. Gone.

When I had him in the palm of my hand, I played my ace. I said, "I don't know what to do. I have nowhere else to go. My life is unmanageable."

I forced myself to tremble, half withdrawal, half emotional revelation.

He said, "I had no idea."

"I know," I said. "I was too ashamed to admit it. To say anything. It was my secret."

"Well," he said, waiting for me to make eye contact, "you've already made your first step."

"I have?"

"Yes. You've admitted your powerlessness."

"I didn't know 'powerlessness' was a word."

"It is," he said. "The most powerful word in recovery."

"Wow."

I thought I'd be excused and allowed back to my cubicle to sift through marketing analysis reports. This is my job, a marketing analyst. I have a degree in Math. I'm really good at punching numbers into a calculator and elaborate spreadsheet formulas.

But instead we went to a nearby restaurant and lunched together for the first time in my eleven months of employment. I continually sniffled and in the bathroom rubbed my nose raw trying to get it to run and trickle nasal leakage to show some kind of cocaine-induced trauma my body had sustained. I mean, I had to admit, I looked pretty good. Normal weight, fairly fit, so I really had to dig deep in portraying myself as a cocaine addict.

I told him the reason I was so rude about protesting many of his decisions—his reasoning for why I was an asshole—was because of the cocaine fog I'd been under. The truth was he made piss-poor decisions without thinking them through and knew very little about marketing. His entire marketing philosophy was summed up in two words: Stroke 'em. And he got a kick out of doing the obscene gesture at the same time. "Give me something good," he'd say to his creative team, "Stroke 'em real good." Then he'd do it.

He didn't seem interested in my attempt at an apology or in anything I was saying. As soon as I paused to take in a breath of air, he interrupted and told me his story. I guess everyone needs to practice their story whenever an opportunity arises in this recovery stuff. God, it was boring. I wished I had some cocaine right

then and there. I imagined it would keep me awake. At least in the movies it always zoomed people into some kind of hyperconsciousness.

Apparently in his using days, the “old” boss was swigging Miller Genuine Draft longnecks in the parking lot and smoking foot-long joints at lunch. And “whatever else I could get my hands on....” I rolled my eyes when he said that, having heard it one too many times. Certainly a recovery cliché if there was one. I picked at my Cobb salad, eating the pieces of ham and egg only when he set his napkin on the table and said, “Well. I know just the place.”

“Huh?”

“Rolling Rivers.”

“What’s that?”

“A rehabilitation center.”

“Huh?”

“They know me there. I’ll take you. We’ll get you admitted. Besides, I get a \$100 gift card to Target for every new patient I bring in.” Before I could say “Huh?” again he said he was only kidding. About the Target gift card part.

We were not driving back to our office when I said, “You’re serious?”

“I am.”

“But don’t I need clothes? Toothbrush? Things like that?”

“Detoxing and getting clean are more important. Besides, they’ll have a toothbrush you can use.”

I knew he was not going to relent, and I had to keep my job. While we were driving away from the city, en route for Rolling Rivers, I called my wife. I told her I was going to rehab. She giggled and said, “Uh-huh. So you want to meet at Juanita’s for dinner tonight?”

“No, sweetie. Seriously, I’m going to a rehabilitation center.”

“What happened?” Her tone had changed instantly; worry seeped into her voice.

“What happened?” I said out loud into the phone, thinking to myself.

“Yes, what happened. Are you okay?”

My boss looked over at me, shot me an encouraging look.

“Honey, what happened is I’m a cocaine addict.”

She burst out into a laughing fit so loud that I had to hold the phone a few inches from my ear. My boss gave me an inquisitive look, curious. I told him, "I think she's in denial." He smiled and went back to watching the road.

She said, "You sounded so serious when you said that."

"Uh-huh," I said, completely stuck.

"So how's work? Your boss being a jerk today?"

"Sorta kinda."

"What'd he do?"

"He's taking me to rehab."

"Why?"

"Because of powerlessness. Don't worry about the details. I'll explain later. I should be out in a week or so."

My boss cleared his throat. "Four weeks, probably. Maybe more. That's up to you."

"Right," I said. I turned away from him and lowered my voice to a low muffle. "Look, honey, I'm doing this to keep my job."

"You're what?" she said.

"Okay. I'm doing this. Did you get that?"

"I'm doing this?"

"Uh-huh. Four more words. To save my job."

"To save my job?"

"Bingo."

"You're seriously crazy if you're going to do this."

"Hey. You said if I lose another job you're leaving me."

Rehab isn't what I thought it would be. Frankly, I thought it'd be more laid back, even a little fun. But most of the folks were court-ordered. This was all business. Most were petty drug possession violators who were chronic users and DUIers. They drink, they drive, they get arrested, and they go to rehab. They're littered everywhere in here. My roommate, Donald, has three DUIs and one simple assault. I asked on our first introduction how he got his "simple assault." He explained that it's a long story. I then asked about the difference between the various assault charges: "I mean," I said, "is there such thing as "complicated assault"?"

He said, "Why are you here?"

"It's a long story."

I think everyone knew I wasn't the real deal. My familiarity with drug and booze lingo was slim. I was asked almost hourly what my drug of choice was; I changed my answer about as often. I said, "I'm a speed freak." And, "I love cocaine." And, "Have you all tried that low-carb beer they got now?" And, "So which is it: Tastes great or less filling?"

During smoke breaks I followed everyone outside and was the only person not smoking. I felt like I did during high school when I had to retake Algebra at night school. Night school was at the alternative education building, and there everyone smoked Marlboros, had lots of sex, and liked their Trans Ams and Camaros to rumble the way a kitty purrs.

I had to redo Algebra because I called my teacher a pervert when he pinched my ass and groped my scrotum. I got expelled from 9th grade Algebra and the school district stuck up for him. I did get my revenge in a way, though. Fifteen years later, students still snicker and call Mr. Dooley "Mr. Ballsack." And passing male students instantly cover their genitalia when Mr. Ballsack is in the vicinity.

There were some real down and dirty addicts in rehab. They had artificially thin hair and skeletal frames that were disgusting to look at; yellowed or diseased teeth and eyes that appeared swollen and no longer able to fit in their heads.

One guy said he always spent his entire paycheck on drugs. I said, "How'd you pay rent?" And everyone looked at me like I was a fly that needed to be squashed.

One woman who appeared to be near my age had already been married three times.

I was the only one without an arrest record.

It was all a big waste of time, except for the very real fact that this was going to save my job when I got out. And it wasn't all that bad to have this pretty blonde girl flirt and rub herself against me when we walked down the hallway to our next group. I had no plans to take this anywhere, but I didn't ask her to stop.

I increasingly found myself warped by these nostalgic moments when I wished I could be young again and take a different path; be irresponsible and not worry myself with the daily minutiae of my life and obsess over life's official rulebook. Even though most everyone in here had unsalvageable lives, there had to have been

a week or a day or even a brief moment in all of it that I would've liked to have been a part of. Just once. To experience—whatever it was—that made them the way they were.

At dinner I tried to make friends. I set my tray down, wiped my brow and said, "Man, I could go for an ice cold Colt 45 and a big fat bag of cocaine right now. Geez, this place is for the birds."

"You admitted yourself voluntarily," Brett said.

"Right," I said. "Either that or die out there in the streets." I pointed at the window. Brett studied me and then laughed to himself and began to eat. I didn't like Brett and have always had dislikes for any and all the Bretts I've ever known in my life. The only Brett I could stand was George Brett and that was only because his last name was Brett, and he was also the best third basemen in all of Major League baseball when I was a kid.

In morning group the therapist asked if I'd made my list of strategies for avoiding using in the future. "You bet I have," I said.

"And would you like to share those with the group?"

"Well, I felt a list was a bit too much. I mean, it almost seemed like a trick question until I realized that it was. The way I'm going to avoid using in the future is simple. I'll just not do it."

She smiled and looked down for a moment, like a deliberate pause, like good rehab timing. "I don't think any of us would be here if it were that simple."

"I think," I began, "that it really is that simple. I think we've all been complicating this way too much. Now, I'm not saying it's not hard to say no. I'm just saying that's where the focus needs to be. That moment. That decision."

"It's called decision point. We talk about it a lot in here."

"Oh," I said, leaning back in my chair, a bit deflated. "First I heard of it."

"Decision point is a crucial theme we address in here. It's a major component of recovery. Making the right decisions. So what I think, is you need to go back and work on your list some more."

That first week flew by and on Saturday afternoon we were allowed visitors. My wife was waiting for me when I went into the visiting room. We hugged. "How are things?" I asked, as we walked to a pair of chairs, holding hands, until she let go of mine.

"Good," she said. "So, is this worth it? To keep this shitty job of yours?"

"I think it is right now."

"This is necessary?" She flicked at my wristband which identified me by my patient number and name and no doubt had a secret insurance company code imbedded deep inside and would beep and send out signal flares the moment my coverage was used up, so that I could be quickly identified and thrown out.

I looked down at my wrist. "A souvenir. Like it?"

"Jesus Christ," she whispered. "I guess I'll go visit my mom next weekend. Since you'll be in here I figured what better time."

"Yes, by all means."

"What do I say when she asks why you're not with me?"

"Tell her I'm in rehab."

"I'm not going to tell her that."

"Why not? Maybe she'll get off my ass if she thinks I have an addiction. It worked with my job situation."

"I'm not telling my mom you're an alcoholic."

"I'm a cocaine addict."

"Whatever."

"Actually, I haven't decided."

"Decided what?"

"What my drug of choice is. Some days I identify with the drunks. Some days the coke addicts kind of sing my tune. The meth addicts are totally crazy, real thrill-seeker types. I used to be a little nuts, too, when I was younger."

"No, you weren't. You dated me since we were juniors in high school. We were far from thrill-seekers. We were tame. Maybe even a little lame."

"Yeah, well," I said, crossing my legs, finding nothing to retaliate with. "I think visiting hours are about up. I need to get back to me now."

"We have three more hours."

"Sweetheart." I took her hand. "Dave Mustaine, you know, the lead singer of Megadeth, well, he sang a song about his hour of darkness, and for the longest time I had no idea what he was talking about."

"What, now you do?"

"Can I finish, please?"

She rolled her eyes.

"You're so kind."

She folded her hands.

"As I was saying, everyone has their own hour of darkness, and mine, sweetheart, has descended. Some days I see no way out except for through the program I'm in right now."

"Okay," she said, standing up, looping her purse on her shoulder. "King Darkness, you take care on your," she made annotation marks in the air, "road to recovery."

We've been together fifteen years, nine of those married, and we both were losing our patience with one another. Our love had been set down to a low-heat simmer for awhile now. We could turn it up to medium-low over the holidays with family and when we were out to dinner with her friends from work. But we prefer to keep it on low. It may even be on off by now.

She didn't come back to visit, although we talked on the phone cordially a few times. After three weeks of non-stop drug and booze talk, I was ready to get seriously loaded. I was jonesing, as they called it. All of this non-stop obsessing about drugs, getting high, and getting drunk seemed like horseshit the first few days I was in here. But now I, too, was having beautiful, surreal dreams in which I was under the influence of a plethora of controlled substances—dreams of flying through clouds, dancing with cartoon characters, and heroic drinking. I woke up tasting the stuff of my dreams on my lips.

Three weeks into rehab I was in bad shape.

I couldn't wait to walk through those doors. I knew exactly where I was headed. My boss would drive me to my condo and I'd slip into my car without saying hello to my wife and drive to Rip-pietoe Liquor, buy me a sixer of Miller Lite, a pint of Smirnoff Blue Label, and get me a cheapie room at Midnight Motel on 16th. I got the scoop on where to get the best quality dope. Narrow Street between 19th and 30th was full of dealers—coke, heroin, crack, pills, ecstasy, anything. I'd hit the ATM and take out a couple hundred in cash and get me a rock, a gram, some pills, and whatever else I could get my hands on. But I had decided meth was too scary and would stay away from it. Those meth addicts looked like ghosts; half-dead, lingering in the room, somewhere, although you never

knew quite where.

My appearance began to suffer. My appetite vanished. I appeared gaunt and preoccupied. One of the counselors called me into a consultation room for a one-on-one. She said, "So what's going on?"

"Nothing, why?" I crossed my arms, a defensive posture.

"You've gotten increasingly worse since you first arrived."

"Bullshit."

"Excuse me?"

"Get off my ass."

"I'm going to have you tested. I think you're using in here."

"The hell? You can't test me."

"We can, too."

I filled the pee cup all the way to the top. "There's enough for a little drink for you," I sneered, carefully handing the cup to Arnold, the on-site lab technician. His glorious job was to look at and test urine eight hours a day, forty hours a week. "It's a job," he'd say. "And piss don't talk back or complain to my boss."

They found nothing, of course.

My wristband didn't beep, but I was notified during breakfast halfway through my third week that my insurance had lapsed.

"Your tank's empty," Peg, the program administrator, said.

"No more insurance?"

"Nope. You have to leave immediately."

"Can I finish my breakfast?"

"Starting now, everything you consume or use comes out of your pocket."

"How much can a bowl of Fruit Loops and a glass of orange juice cost?"

Peg flipped through a binder. "Twenty dollars."

I dropped my spoon like it was on fire and followed her to my room. She watched as I began to look for things to pack. Then something occurred to me. I said, "I didn't bring in anything. Everything I wore was issued to me. I only have these." I pointed to the slacks and belt and shirt hanging in my tiny closet. She stood there.

"Can I call for a ride? Or will that cost me, too?"

"Depends. Is it local or long distance?"

I called my boss and an hour later he picked me up. I thanked Peg for her help. "I won't forget you guys," I said, touching her shoulder.

"Your ride is here," she said, her clipboard up against her chest.

My boss leaned over and pushed open the passenger door. "Get in," he said. "Your new life has begun. How do you feel?" I got situated and found the seatbelt, clicked myself into safety.

"Oh," I said, letting a deep breath out through my nose.

My boss gave me a studied once-over. "You look awful."

"Rehab does that to you. It's a very ego-deflating experience."

"Right, but in almost four weeks you should have been inflated again."

"No, sir. They kicked my ass in there."

"Well," he said, his face flushing, "I don't think you're ready."

"I have no choice. My tank's empty."

"Your what?"

"My insurance is up. No more coverage. They were going to charge me a hundred bucks for a little box of Fruit Loops in there."

"Christ."

"Yeah, no kidding. How can I get well under those circumstances?"

"I hear you." He put the car in gear and it jerked forward, and we were on our way.

As we were driving, I watched the leafless trees that followed us along the interstate. They were serene, even beautiful in some spots. I guessed I probably belonged out there somewhere, away from this. With this new disease of addiction I'd been unlucky to catch, I knew the days would be long and the nights lonely. I teared up at the odds before me: A sobriety rate of only about ten percent after one year. I already knew I wouldn't be in the ten percent club.

"You can call me," my boss said. "Anytime."

"Okay."

"If for some reason I don't answer it means I'm busy. Or asleep."

"Okay."

"But leave a voicemail and I'll get back to you as soon as I can."

"Right."

We exit off the interstate and meander through the suburban village of White Forest. This is my community, a cornucopia of all things stoic and white. The whiteness exudes well beyond the town's name; it is truly a forest of whiteness.

Then we arrive. I get out and thank him.

He drives off, and I stand there halfway between the condo and my car. It doesn't take long for my powerlessness to take over, and the next thing I know I'm signing up for a room at the Midnight Motel.

"Two hours?" the clerk asks.

"All night."

"Forty bucks."

I pay cash and find my room and set down my sixer and pint of vodka. I turn on the television and find a scratchy movie from the '70s. One of those cop-chases-killer movies with younger versions of familiar actors.

I open a beer, hold it up, and look at it. I never drank much at all in my life. I've never been drunk. I played video games in college on Friday and Saturday night. This is crazy, I think. But I can feel something click in my brain, a transformation, like they talked about in rehab. I'm unable to set the beer down and make the right choice.

I drink down two beers fast, which leaves me slightly out of breath and burping heavily.

This isn't so bad, I think. I crack open the third one and punch the pillows until they sit just right and throw myself backwards into them like they're clouds. Ahh, they catch. I sip my beer, then follow that with a gulp that reduces the weight of the can in half. I burp yet again and laugh at myself. My thoughts turn to the delicious drugs I can't wait to appreciate.

I feel like talking, like calling someone on the phone. I call

my wife and her cell phone goes to voicemail immediately. She turned it off? I wonder. Digging through my wallet I come up with the phone number for April, the lovely blonde from rehab. She left a week before I did and had planted this little piece of paper in my back pocket when she gave me a goodbye hug. She must think I'm good material for husband number four. Before I know it, the phone is ringing and I've got the can upside down pouring the last of the liquid into my mouth. I miss the last few drops and they splatter on my nose and cheeks. I catch a glance of myself in the mirror, and I'm just smiling away, I can't help it. A noon drunk fool.

"Hello, hello," this voice says.

"Hey, hey! You there!?"

"Who is this?" the voice says.

"April. What's going on? It's me, from rehab."

"Which one?"

"Which one? Ha ha, you are a funny chick. It's me."

"Are you drunk?"

"Hell, no. Sobriety all the way. My higher power has me firmly in his shaky grip. Shit, drunk. I mean, maybe a few beers. Hold on. I can count them. One, two, three, and right as I speak and I am walking across the room to grab number four." I drop the phone on the bed and pick up the beer and open it, then pick up the phone again. "You hear that? Hello? You there April?"

She hung up.

Number four goes down without memory, and when I wake up it is dark outside. It's always the first thing I identify when I wake up. Is it sunny or dark? Is it cloudy? What time is it? The eternal questions.

I still felt groggy and did the most logical thing I could think of: Close my eyes.

When they opened again it was sunny out and it didn't take long to figure out it was a new day. For a few seconds I was hopeful I'd blacked out. I scanned my memory eager for darkness, time erased, events forgotten. But I remembered everything. I'd just taken a very long nap, aided by the beer. I immediately called my wife while still under the covers. She answered on the first ring.

"Where are you?"

"Baby," I began.

"Don't baby me. Where are you?"

"I'm in a lonely place, baby. There's only one way to go. And that way is up."

"What have you done? Where are you?"

"It's rock bottom. That's where I am. And I'm going to need all of your love and support on my road back."

"You're driving solo on this road back from wherever you are."

"Huh?"

"I'm moving out. I turned 32 yesterday."

"Oh, shit, your birthday."

"I don't even care about that. The point is that 32 is when young stops. Now I'm sliding into those middle years. Those are the years that really matter. Everything up until now can be cleaned off, looked past, lied about, glossed over, but from now on this is for real. This is real life, the real world, and frankly, I don't know how up I am to spending it with a buffoon."

"What buffoon?"

"You! You're the buffoon. Look at you."

"Have you found someone else? Is that it?"

"No! That's the pathetic part. I don't need to fall in love with someone else to realize I don't love you anymore. I don't need any crisis. I figured it out all on my own. That's how obvious it is. You get it?"

I did the hanging up this time, unable to bear anymore.

My boss's number rang three times. He asked where I was and I told him a few features of the truth without giving him the full picture. He said, "I'm putting you on personal leave without pay. I'd prefer to fire you outright but this corporate policy bullshit dictates that I follow and obey all the processes that are in place. This is a 30-day leave I've put you on, but I suggest you look for another job because when you come back, I'm going to fire you."

"But..." I mustered with shallow strength. "We're rehabbers. Recovery friends."

"You, my friend, need serious help. I need someone reliable and someone who is serious about recovery. You didn't manage to stay clean for 24 hours after your release. That is not a good sign. I don't have the patience for someone in your state. And the most important piece in all of this is that I have a job to do. My job is to make money and that takes precedent over your mental health and

addiction issues. The knife's sharp on both sides, my friend."

"I'll go back into rehab."

"Doesn't matter if you do or not as far as your job is concerned. We already allowed you one mental health leave. One is all you get. You're maxed out on corporate empathy, my friend."

"Shit."

"Yep. That's about all you have left."

"But come on, there's got to be something."

"Well, to make matters worse, which in your case couldn't get much worse, I never liked you much. Thought you were a bit of an asshole and was going to fire you the beginning of the year anyhow. So this isn't coming out of nowhere. It was inevitable, just like your relapse."

Left speechless, I said, "I don't know what to say."

"Goodbye would be nice."

I threw the phone and it bounced off the wall and I leaned over to see if it had shattered into a million pieces. It hadn't. It was stronger than I was.

Then my eyes cut to the room-temperature beers sitting on the dresser and the pint of vodka.

I grabbed a beer and managed to work down a modest swallow and flipped on the television. *The View* was on, and they were gushing over some good-looking male celebrity actor. They were touching him and couldn't quit smiling.

I twisted off the cap on the pint of vodka, intent on at least getting something done today even if this was all I had left. I swallowed enough to make me feel like it wasn't going to go, but I held my breath, my eyes watered, and it slid down my throat. Then a few minutes later I felt something. Actually, I think I saw it: A glint of forthcoming bliss tickling me behind my eyes. I looked in the mirror and saw myself and I felt like it was the last time, like the last thing you see before you close your eyes and submerge underwater.

I felt the tinge of powerlessness, stronger this time, and it made me shiver, made me afraid I was going someplace I'd have trouble leaving.

Calling John Murphy After Twenty Years

Because today I passed a '68 Camaro
shivering beneath a fist of pulsing bass,
watched the frayed strings of denim cut-offs
stroke the thighs of girls who sauntered
and I thought only of their mothers,
Because now weed is a menace pulled from between tulips,
crocuses, and daisies and yesterday
I spent more money on chemicals to expel them
than I ever did on nickel bags
pulled from pockets beneath bleachers,

I tread creaking basement stairs, cradling the receiver.

Because every night I check the mirror,
search for signs of woman's work
dug into lines beside my mouth and eyes,
Because my mother's face emerges
a little more each day, the slow scent of her woven
in the drooping of my eyelids,
no oil or cream strong enough to wash her away,

I'm running a finger over illuminated buttons.

Because my breasts have begun the long slide toward my belly
and last week walking by a construction site
the only holler notching the air came from a jackhammer,
Because no one has slid a hand inside my blouse
in a dark corner of a crowded room in years
and tucked into my husband's tackle box
are magazines filled with young girls, spread legs welcoming

I start pressing numbers.

Because I've melted down into a wife now
whittled against the sharp edge of the vow I made,
pared by the wailing of toddlers
at a checkout line beside the candy rack,
sculpted by the blade of soapy dishes, pee soaked sheets,
and instant rice and in dreams he visits me, still sixteen,
offering beer and cigarettes, assuring me they really were the answer

I'm listening to the trilling echo of an extended hand.

But as it rings I watch drops of water
spill in slow succession, liberate themselves
after traveling the cold copper maze
concealed beneath the bathroom tile,
And because I realize I'll never find the path
they've forged to freedom

I hang up and start counting droplets.

Bagels

we used to leave early in the morning to go to the market.
we started at the deli counter, waited in line together for cheese,
then on to the bread section for bagels. when we got home,
we ate bagels together for breakfast.

we used to eat bagels together for breakfast, then we'd leave around
noon to go to the market. she'd get the cheese and the bread
while i picked out the meat and some fish. when we got home,
i'd make a burger for her and fish for me for lunch.

i used to make a burger for her and fish for me for lunch, then she
would leave in the afternoon to go to the market by herself to pick up
the cheese and the bread and the meat and the fish, while i stayed home
and made something for dinner.

now we go to different markets in different towns,
and i haven't had a bagel in ages.

Future Draft

I'm in line at Subway when I realize
that every moment time stops and starts again.
Snow falling outside into the distant crinkle
of "Listen To Your Heart" from the tiny watt speakers
over my head, and I have so many papers to grade.

Instead of driving home, I sit in my car in the parking lot
after my sandwich and write this poem.
It's mid-afternoon. Still Michigan gray.
The air still sleek, flat, and white.
I never seem to eat on time. Not on anyone's time,
anyway. And about stopping and starting,
forget I said that. Forget I said anything.

I'm not in the parking lot anymore.
I'm not doing anything. Crystals of snow
aren't falling slantwise in the stiff breeze.
And the girl, the one without hips yet,
maybe fourteen in line with her mother,
came back twenty years later while I was still eating
to tell me I should listen, but not to my heart,
and definitely not to my head, just listen.

I'll never forget. She came in just a few degrees
forward of center like she'd learned to carry her weight
slightly in front of her in all those years.
All those child-rearing, hair-graying years.
And her momentum stalled when she saw me,
just for a hair's breadth of a line,
because I was already writing this in my head.
I was glad to see her. I wanted her here, in this line,

and the next. But the way she looked at me.

The way she stopped just for a moment
before starting forward again.
The way a hummingbird makes decisions.
It said to me...or, well, I deciphered it as:
You've got nothing left
but your best guess.

Running in Circles

I sit up straight. I gingerly position my hair to frame my eyes, look down at the menu, pretend to be occupied. The waitress stops by, asking questions with forced politeness. I answer without hearing what I say. She calls me “Sweetie.” I hate being called “Sweetie.”

The hairs on the back of my neck rise, and I feel that you are here. The air that surrounds you sweeps past me, blowing my carefully constructed appearance into disarray. You flop down across from me, knocking the breath from my lungs with your scent: Laundry detergent. My eyes close fleetingly, and I feel the heat emanating from shaking machines at your house; a dog barks; I feel home.

Your playful smirk drags me back to now. Hard table, cold iced tea, sharp clanking of glasses, the smell of barbeque sauce, the folds of the napkin on my lap underneath my sweaty palms. You order your usual and we laugh, remembering how I used to tease you for your monotony. I order something new, pretending that things are different now, that you don’t know me anymore.

Our conversation starts out morbidly. We ignore the stench of our dead relationship that still lingers on our healed wounds by talking about the physical deaths of loved ones. You tell me that your grandparents died. I feel winded. I ask why you didn’t call me, but I know the answer. I wonder if I will call you when my grandparents die.

I ask if you heard about the girl from our high school who got hit by a car. Her boyfriend saw her die. Suddenly I am him, haunted by the perpetually young face of a girlfriend who cannot grow old. She is suspended in time; I cannot let her go.

Our situation seems so much lighter in comparison, but I wonder guiltily if our perception of each other is all that different. The Tim that I knew, the Tim I loved, is dead and gone. He was going to love me forever, and I was going to let him. He looked at me like no one else ever has, or ever could. I see a photograph, I hear a woman’s voice: “Look at how he’s looking at you!” I smile. I know.

Now I look at you from across the table, a ghost of the Tim who looked at me. I search for remnants of the Tim I knew in your eyes, realizing that my Tim, like the poor dead girl haunting her boyfriend, will be hovering in the tangles of my memory in a never-ending youth. Trapped, clambering unsuccessfully to reconcile with the present you that I cannot accept because this you doesn't look at me that way anymore. Maybe you are still you, and it's me who has changed.

We finish lunch, and I walk outside with you slowly, prolonging the proximity of my awareness to yours. I feel almost shy near you. Almost. The excitement that comes from being both timid and comfortable around something that was once familiar but is now strangely foreign snakes its way through my veins. It courses through me as we say our goodbyes, as you cradle the back of my head with a tender hand and hug me like you mean it. I make you promise to stay in touch, hopeful, but knowing full well that you won't.

I slam the car door and my foot feels heavy on the gas pedal, sinking down with an inevitability that I don't feel compelled to fight. Suddenly I'm home, not realizing how I got there. SLAM. Car door. Boom boom boom. Feet on stairs. I rip my clothes off in a frenzy, replace them, tie my shoes, run out the door. Pound pound pound pound pound. I try to compel the pounding of my feet to jar my brain, force me to forget how I once loved you. How you looked at me in that photo. How I smiled and laughed. How you were the one that made me smile and laugh. How I repaid you in the end.

The distant sound of your engine churning crashes upon me, breaks up the forced rhythm of my step. I fight against the roar, pick up the pace, run away from it as fast as I can. I escape. Now my head is clear. Now I can think about the pulsing and painful pleasure of running itself. No, I do not want to run that familiar trail. I choose a new path. An unknown path. I push on.

The black fence passes one rung after the other, glimpses of lush green landscape peaking through, creating a flip book that follows me. It clicks into motion, projecting a past that I have not watched in a long time. Flash. Green, black, green, black, green-blackgreenblackgreen.

The	The	The	Stolen	Your	A
guitar	ice cream	ridiculous	candlelight	tears	mistake
pick	you	nicknames	in	in	in
earrings	brought	you	a	a	the
you	at	gave	tent	lonely	warm
made	2	to	at	L.A.	summer
me.	a.m.	me.	Sunset.	apartment.	Air.

When does this fence end? I run faster, fast forwarding the projection to catch up to present, where the heat from my burning muscles ignites the air around me, burns up the memories I refuse to linger in. The fence ends. I stop. I put my hands on my knees. I pant, I pant, I pant, I pant, I pant. I look up and realize that the new trail I chose with such bold certainty was just another branch of my old trail. It has led me back full circle to where I started.

I pant. I sweep the hair off my face. You aren't there to look at me.

Whaling Museum

Back and forth we walked each day through the brisk little town perched hors d'oeuvre-like on the edge of the sea until finally we scammed enough cash to enter the whaling museum, a decision we immediately regretted. The harpoons still gleamed with blood, the security guard stood with hand on holster, giant whale penises floated in brine. Or maybe they were average by whale standards. I realized then that you and I had never officially met. We'd spent time together. You wore the same Pink Floyd t-shirt every day, you had a starfish-shaped scar over your left eye, but I didn't know your name. We called each other Octavius and Mrs. Magenta, don't ask me why. "What a waste," I said as we fled the museum and made our way down to the beach. "Let's start a museum of deforestation," you said, a typical Mrs. Magenta kind of comment. You picked up a discarded beer can and brown muck spilled out. You had that look in your eye like you wanted to wade out into the ocean with stones in your pockets. Maybe it was time for us to find you a new t-shirt. Did they really need to keep those whale penises on display? Eventually I went to school and became an actuary. I always wondered what became of you.

Hustle

A human advertisement waves from the side
of the road. I guess the dark
ruddy face beneath the Statue of Liberty crown is
supposed to remind me to have

my taxes done. Only he reminds me of you, or,
to be exact, that red and white
Ford truck you left upside down on the side of the road.
You left it there, alone, to tell

the authorities how it came to be a rusted
beetle on its back as you crawled
through muddy woods, inventing excuses for the wife
and kids—*I fell asleep at the wheel*

or *I swerved to miss some crazy asshole in dark clothes.*
I forget which you used that time,
but after those four muddy miles to a friend's house,
you showered, washed your clothes, slept

like a wanderer in a cold room down the street from
your family, while your truck, stranded,
confused, and mixed in with the armadillos on a shoulder
of the road, let the world know

you're a drunk. But I shouldn't call you that.
When I drink too much, I dream
about you. Sometimes, you're a gorilla that rises
from the ground with flutes of champagne

in each hand. I'm not sure what this means. Maybe you're
getting remarried. Maybe she's

a good girl who doesn't know questions and doesn't
speak English. There is no way

she could, and understand you. You must kiss her lacquered
face goodnight and think of someone
else's children or no one's. Then you crawl through the wrong
Texas wetlands to search for

what you don't remember losing on one of the nights
you were almost a criminal.



Bill Suggs' Safe House

The last time anyone had seen Fitzpatrick was the summer when cats overran the Safe House. The oldest farm cat, weeks after birthing a litter of eight, had stalked the perimeter of the house, teats hanging heavily from her chest, as she searched for her mewling brood under the porch or behind the hen house. This was ten years earlier, when the Safe House was still in use, before state agencies opened shelters in Columbia and Booneville. Women would sneak kittens into their rooms when Bill Suggs wasn't looking, tiny weights cradled in their hand-me-down skirts. Back then, some tom still lurked in the tallgrass of the woods, slinking up to the back porch, waiting for the mother cat to coyly curl her body around the rail post. The cats gave the long summer days a lurid sexuality contrasted only by the queer innocence of grown women sneaking kittens into their bedrooms at night.

At present, the Safe House was empty except for Bill and a few offspring of those cats. The house stood far from town on a chert back road that edged the countryside and river bottoms, a place where people get their mail delivered by a fellow in a blue pickup truck. His name was Howard, that man in the blue truck, and the women who once lived in the house knew everything about him—who his wife was, what church he attended, where Howard went to high school—yet he knew nothing about the women except that all the mail arrived under Bill Suggs' name and the women wore the same box-stitched shawl from one to the next, and whenever a new woman came, another one left, but the shawl...it stayed behind.

These were women who staggered into police stations at four in the morning with nowhere else to go, wives of professors at the university in Columbia, daughters of shop owners, girlfriends of grad students; most were not born in Missouri but became trapped in it, with no family to claim them nor friends to take them in.

The home nearest the Safe House was a trailer on ten acres of land, alone in the middle of a field without a truck or a car or

even the tracks of a bike running toward it, just leggy grass and ragweed and goldenrod crowding it in. The man who lived there did not want to be seen, did not pick up the mail delivered to the rusty box at the edge of his land, and did not want to be bothered—or so it seemed. That man was Fitzpatrick, and that was all the women of Bill Suggs' Safe House ever knew.

A family portrait of dead women greeted anyone who entered the Safe House. This portrait was of the first family, the farm builders, six women in dark, 1860s clothes with sharp white scalps showing through the parts in their dark hair. The matriarch stood like a ghost in the middle, her five daughters seated around her, all of them survivors of the crazed guerrilla warfare that ensued years after the Civil War ended, the years of fighting and murder in Missouri. Any men who once lived there were long dead, killed by Unionists, leaving behind women with faces weary from death and forearms muscled from farm labor. In those days, it fell to the women to clean the corpses, and Bill Suggs imagined this photo was taken not long after this group of woman had cleaned the murdered bodies of their men, their naked mortality given one last embrace by tender female hands. You could see it in each woman's eyes; that each one had clasped hands white with death, that the wife had held her husband's cold fingers while her daughters sponged blood from his brow.

When Bill Suggs bought this house in 1972, she bought it from Eleanor Suggs, an 80 year-old woman born illegitimately on the same oak table where the men had been cleaned before burial. Eleanor wanted nothing of the house, nothing of its past, and left the old portrait of women and the treadle sewing machine in the front room and the long oak table for Bill Suggs.

Bill Suggs was only 31 when she took on the Suggs family name, the name of the father beaten to death by guerrillas in 1866. Her old name was a ghost to her, her old self. She took the name Bill Suggs because she needed to vanish, and the name was generic and comfortable and pleasantly masculine (masculine enough for her to wear trousers and old flannel shirts).

Bill started the Safe House when there were no women's shelters in Columbia, when she herself—a young graduate student in Psychology—had to pack up her things and run. Instead of run-

ning to the home of a friend, or running to colleagues in the department, she spent the last bit of her inheritance on this two-story farmhouse ten miles outside of town, so far into the country that no man, she thought, could reach her.

This man, Fitzpatrick, her nearest neighbor, was a man with a reputation of self-imposed isolation. In all these years, only one person—a middle-aged woman—had wandered into Pierpont Market looking for him. No one got her name before she drove onto the gravel road toward his trailer. The owner of Pierpont said she was pretty and well-dressed, that she wasn't wearing the kind of shoes for high-footing it through weeds, and wasn't driving the kind of car that could make it through the elephant grass leading up to his trailer.

No one had seen Fitzpatrick for years. Now he'd suddenly resurfaced. Bill first encountered him by the creek filling plastic milk containers with water. The creek, a ten-minute walk from her house, opened into an a slow-moving pool which she called the River Bill. She liked to go down to the River Bill at dawn to take a leisurely swim that made her feel completely in her skin, thrilling at the chill of water. It was the only time she let her hair down from its long braid, letting it unravel into S's along her spine.

The morning she saw Fitzpatrick, the sun was not yet warm, and she'd just removed all of her clothes, taking everything off to dive down into the cold water, and dived down to the bottom until her ears popped. As she rose up again to breathe, she swam to a waist-deep area and stood. Then she heard the twig break. Swiveling around, breasts beneath her crossed arms, she stared at a man on the shore.

Fitzpatrick! A sighting more rare than a mountain lion. He wore a long gray beard and raggedy clothes. His eyes widened, opening up for her in childlike wonderment. He'd come from the rough side of the valley where the deer found shelter at night, a thicket of fallen oaks where poison ivy crawled up the torsos of trees. She'd never been on his side of the creek, though it was easy enough to wade the shallow waters and cross over. Something had always told her it was a line not to be crossed. Now they both stood on the border—his side, her side—and Fitzpatrick stared back in silence, eyes locked, not looking away.

Tiny fish darted down stream around Bill's legs. A woodpecker in one of the trees tapped out Morse code. Bill hooked her toes around a pebble at the bottom of the creek. Her skin pricked with cold electricity as she braced her forearms against her breasts. She couldn't look away from the man on the shore and imagined that this was the same conflicted fascination felt by two members of warring Indian tribes who happened upon each other across a stream—one part entranced, the other part prepared to kill.

And how would Fitzpatrick try to kill her? she wondered. Would he press her head down to the smooth, cold stones at the creek bottom until silty water filled her lungs? Or would he slit her with a knife and leave her bleeding in the River Bill? Someone had, in fact, tried to kill her once, because he loved her so very much.

She thought a man as old as Fitzpatrick, a man in his mid-sixties, wasn't capable of that kind of love. She concluded that this man called Fitzpatrick who stood like a question mark along the muddy banks of the River Bill, his head tucked low in submission, was neither capable of fighting nor raising a fist.

"Hullo!" Bill called out like a warm porch-greeting to a neighbor passing by.

"H'low," Fitzpatrick replied, his voice graveled from disuse.

"I'm naked," Bill said, feeling suddenly stupid for having said it. "Well, I suppose you noticed that."

Fitzpatrick squinted at her, as if he hadn't noticed, then lowered his empty milk jugs to the water and let them fill. Bill waited, watching him, until he finally rose up, looking at her standing there. He raised his hand as if he were confused about how to say good-bye, then loped back into the woods from where he'd come.

The following week, Bill caught Fitzpatrick stealing fresh-laid eggs out from under her chickens. Thinking he was a fox, Bill went to the kitchen door with her shotgun and a flashlight, and through the door's window watched him trundle away, arms cradling half a dozen eggs, the hunched question mark of his body punctuating the darkness. Bill threw open the door and yelled out to him, "Hey, Fitzpatrick! You want some bacon with those eggs?"

Then one afternoon Fitzpatrick came walking up through the fields and came knocking on the Safe House door. Bill had been out picking blackberries and found the old man cupping his hands

to the windowpane to peer inside. He waited on the porch, his boot heels thick with mud, his pant legs ticked with tiny seeds and burrs. The farm cat made figure eights around his legs.

"I have nothing," he said when Bill came walking up. Then he uncurled his fingers and held out a tiny rodent skull with its long yellowed incisors still intact. He held it out as though it were some kind of country currency.

Bill took the skull from his hand and placed it gently in her breast pocket. "That'll do," she said.

Bill believed in country justice—in settling all deals with a handshake and letting a needy neighbor steal an egg—so she let Fitzpatrick into her safe house under the pretext that you save a man who's asking for salvation. His dark smell of sweat and virility saturated the foyer where only women had stood for thirty years. Bill could taste his rank odor in her mouth—the oily taste of hormones—and gulped it down, mouthful after mouthful, filling her lungs.

"You need to get cleaned up, and I won't take 'No' for an answer," Bill said as she led him to the ground floor bathroom, where a bear claw tub sat in the center. Bill drew the bath water with a good foam of bubbles. The old mother cat with her pink teats exposed sat in the doorway, watching the spectacle of the old man, his body hunched on the toilet, his brown slacks ragged at the bottom with frayed threads hanging down.

"All right, mister, we've got to get you undressed," Bill said. "Don't be shy, now. It's not like I haven't seen it before."

Bill stood with a hand on her hip and turned around, waiting until the clothes came off and Fitzpatrick stepped into the bathtub, naked and thin, ribs protruding. He sat there with his knees drawn up to his chest, his bald knee caps peeking out from the murky water.

Bill held her hands under the water, leaning close to his back, feeling her breath quiver in her lungs as she reached down low with the wash cloth and stroked it over his lower back, the smell of him so strong that she had to breathe through her mouth.

"We need to bring you back to civilization," she said. "Bring you back to life." She felt as if she were saying it to herself.

Bill drew out his arms and let them hang over the wooden floor, dripping as she pulled the wash cloth out to his finger-

tips, gently working the cloth between the webbing of his fingers, then down to his finger nails where she worked the dirt free. She scrubbed away the grease on his palms and wrists, then leaned in close, toward his chest, and brought the cloth under his arms. Every now and then she'd catch herself scrubbing too hard and let out a laugh, not knowing what the old man was feeling with his eyes shut. Finally Bill drew her rag up to his face to wipe away his tears.

This man who had nothing—neither family, nor friends—had come here to learn how to live again, with mankind, not without it. Bill had to teach him how, just as she taught the girls in the safe house how not to live with mankind, how to say “No” with force, how to distrust strangers, how to always be on guard. Bill had lived her whole life saying “No.” And now she had to teach this man how to invite strangers into his home and trust people again.

“We need to begin a few lessons,” Bill said, “starting now.” Fitzpatrick’s eyes were shut and his beard dripped water into the tub.

“Say, ‘Yes,’” Bill told Fitzpatrick. “Keep your eyes closed and say, ‘Yes.’”

“Yes,” he replied.

“Now say it with your eyes open. Looking at me.”

He leaned forward, as if to touch her. “Yes.”

“Now say it with your mouth, but not speaking.” His face bent into a craggy, brown-toothed smile.

“Now say it with your eyes.” He squinted, looking confused.

“Now say ‘Yes’ with everything: Eyes, mouth, lips.”

And he replied, “Yes with everything. Eyes. Mouth. Lips.”

There are only so many golden moments in a person’s life, moments where all the right colors and images come into focus. It ashamed Bill to think that this was one of those moments, that a man could conjure such a feeling of warmth inside her. In her own mind, she was saying “No.” No, she wouldn’t let go. Until it occurred to her that the word “No” was the only currency she had in this world, and you couldn’t buy a damn thing with it.

She finished by rinsing Fitzpatrick’s body and hair, ladling a tin bucket of bathwater over his shoulders, and then she left him

to his own devices in the bathtub. Bill returned later with clean clothes—some trousers and one of her shirts—and a toothbrush with paste. She told him that he need not speak when he looked up with watery eyes, opening his mouth to thank her.

“It’s easy to love a man who’s so powerless,” one of the girls once told Bill; the girl was speaking of a man who’d beaten her every day of her life. It occurred to Bill that she’d never met a powerless man until now. She felt a screw in her soul turn loose, something that had been turned tight for years, and a new emotion was leaking out. It embarrassed her the way being a woman meant you were always leaking—either tears or blood or milk—all of it seemed like a slow drain on a woman’s strength. Bill had stopped crying years ago. Menopause had come and gone. Now this, this was some kind of emotional seepage. No, it wasn’t love, but something else, something stronger, and she’d brought it all upon herself the moment she let Fitzpatrick through the door.

That night, after feeding Fitzpatrick a tuna sandwich and a glass of milk, Bill packed him a box of canned food and coffee, then loaded Fitzpatrick into her old truck and drove him down the gravel road and through the weeds to the front of his trailer, where her headlights hit the warped aluminum siding and broken screens on the windows. The place looked cold and abandoned. Bill sat with the engine running in front of his house and remembered, years ago, that she once sat in a young boy’s pickup truck after an uneventful when. The boy worked in a milk-bottling plant and wore rubber gloves all day long. Bill, smelling of stale Doublemint gum, parted her lips for him. And the boy, all hands, touched her face and body with fingertips that smelled of cheese; everything about him reeked of sour milk.

“Well,” Bill said, feeling like she was the one who now reeked of sour milk, “I guess this is it.” She nodded toward the windshield. “Time to go home.” She said it rather coldly. Fitzpatrick squinted at her, eyes locked.

Bill’s heart felt strange and intense inside her chest. If Fitzpatrick touched her, she thought she might put a hand to his throat and hold it there, tight.

She swallowed hard and said, “Here,” reaching into her pocket, giving him the white rodent skull, papery and fragile.

Fitzpatrick took the skull in his hand and the box of food on

his lap and left. He walked to his door, head bent down to his chest, and turned back once, looking at Bill, the question mark of his body asking, begging, pleading for something Bill couldn't provide.

Play Therapy

Sister, I cut out pictures of us
and taped the heads to popsicle sticks stained
red and purple—my puppet talks to yours, mostly,

it has even slapped yours twice
this morning, and I am starting to feel
better. My husband wonders

why I yell at myself when I close the door
on him, but if I explained I would have to show
him his own head on a stick; he would know

that sometimes I grit my teeth
when I talk to it. I used to write letters, some
sent, some sealed in my drawer, and

the therapist helped, but trying to hide
her disapproval, her nose would wrinkle,
giving her away, and I have enough

judgment in my life! Now, she observes me
from atop a stick, propped on a chair opposite
this orange one, where my puppet speaks

to yours, accuses you of placing the blame on me
for so many broken dishes, stolen chocolate bars, lost
rhinestone earrings...spankings I didn't deserve—

no longer do I keep a mirror nearby, because I can feel
the way my face seizes when I berate you
and I wonder if you are doing the same to me.

Freedom is a Big Wheel

Our house sat at the bottom of a winding hill
and on summer afternoons we would ride our bikes
up to the top, Boo Boo and I, leading the pack
of neighborhood kids to its zenith, a tiny army
of Big Wheels and tricycles, ten-speeds and dirt bikes,
peddling hard against resistance. Once at the summit,
we would make our descent, one by one,
pigtails and shoelaces flying, legs out as the peddles spun
furiously, and if we were feeling the rush of the daredevil,
and let's face it, it was usually the boys who were the bravely stupid
among us, we'd lift not only our feet, but our arms as well,
giving our limbs to the wind. We'd repeat this stunt all summer,
always taking the same path, until one afternoon,
after several successful missions, the woman who lived
in the big olive-colored house across the street ordered us
to stop. My father referred to them as the Polacks,
the people who lived in the big olive house, and not realizing
that this was a reference to their country of origin,
I spent my childhood thinking that Polack was their last name,
not an ethnic slur. They were older than our parents,
Mr. and Mrs. Polack, and didn't socialize with anybody
on our street, but they did fight with each other,
arguing so loudly that the noise would travel from inside
their house and into my bedroom window, waking me
while I slept. So when Mrs. Polack raised the pane and screamed
"You kids better stop that or I'm going to call the police!" we believed
her, and, not wanting to spend the rest of the summer behind bars,
we went home, quietly, slowly, never playing with gravity again.

The Painful Truth

I suppose it all started that one Saturday morning.
10:00 a.m. The Food Network was on.

Hey there! My name is Rachael Ray, and I make thirty-minute meals. Now that means in the time it takes you to watch this program, I'll have made a delicious and healthy meal from start to finish. Okay kids, today we are making grilled sammies with apple cinnamon sausage and French toast. Yum-o!

I started to get hungry and walked to the kitchen. There was nothing in the refrigerator, as usual. I took out a box of Honey Bunches of Oats and made a bowl of cereal. The morning was quiet. Rachael had just put the finishing touches on the dish. Thirty minutes had gone by, and, as promised, a meal was made.

10:31 a.m. I heard the door to my parents' room open. Within seconds, my mother appeared in the frame of the door.

"I know what you are."

I continued to take another bite of cereal. Her face drew closer. Our eyes were linked like a chain to a prisoner.

"I know what you are. Why don't you just tell me?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Why don't you just tell me you're gay? I already know!"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I know about you and your *friend*. Just tell me you're gay."

"You're full of it."

"I asked your cousin last night about your *friend's* earring. It's on the left ear. I know what you are. Just tell me."

"What do you want me to say?"

"Just tell me."

"I'm gay."

"Oh my god." My mother began to walk away.

"I have to tell your dad. Oh my god." My mother frantically grasped the phone. The pace at which her fingers dialed my father's number quickened. "Why isn't he picking up the phone?"

My sister walked into the room and saw my mother in panic.
“Laura. Justin is gay. Oh my god.”

My sister shrugged her shoulders and looked at me and said,
“So?”

My mother continued to dial my father’s number. “Enrique, you need to come home right now,” her first voicemail read.

“Enrique, you will never believe what your son is,” the second followed.

“Justin is gay,” the third.

Her voice sunk. With every message she left, another tear followed. Twenty failed messages later, my mother finally let go of the phone. All I could see as I stood in her doorway was an empty body upon a bed, sobbing over and over again. My sister walked over to comfort her. I walked back to my room and sat on my bed. My eyes grew hallow. Everything felt lost.

1:43 p.m., my father came home.

His walk was flustered. He stared straight into the ground as he set his briefcase down. He immediately started to prepare his lunch. My mother’s empty body wandered into the kitchen from her bed. It retained just enough motion to maintain a presence in the room.

“Do you know what kind of a lifestyle you’re asking for, Justin?” My father’s hands pressed against the counter. “You’re asking for a shorter life!”

My father paused. “I’ve been down to San Francisco. I’ve worked in the shelters over there. Do you know how many of *those* people have AIDS and are dying? Is that what you want?”

“I didn’t ask to be gay. This is who I am. It isn’t a choice.”

My father finally turned around. His eyes were filled with tears. He shifted his body and walked outside to empty the trash. I followed.

“This is a really big shame in our culture. This isn’t who we are. Mexicans are disowned because they choose this lifestyle.” My father kept his eyes distant.

“This isn’t a choice.”

My father walked back inside.

1:59 p.m. My body stood alone in silence.

2:00 p.m. There were no more words to be said.

November, 2008

In Washington, the time runs not quite three hours ahead of California but more like two hours and fifty-five minutes, and I'm still not quite sure what that means but I know that it might have something to do with the real energy that wraps around the half-tall 'scrapers (that cannot legally exceed the U.S. Capitol in height) and you can't feel it anywhere else but in these corridors of government and business, on the Metro where too many suits cram for the commute, on the street where the peddlers hawk memorabilia (there are hundreds, like amusement park stands selling popcorn and candy, pushing Obama souvenirs, everything from hats to buttons to ties to underwear), at the White House on that one night when they gathered in jubilation and triumph, and in the thump of the morning of the fifth, and it is a city that always moves, not slithering like the snake people imagine but beating like a heart where we the people and the cash are the blood to keep this country

alive.

The Election Party

Someone had even brought
the skinny girls in their summer dresses
to hover over plates
of freshly-picked exotic fruit.

The mayor was there, too,
fashionably late and wearing leather,
and who, when no one was looking
I am told, shoved his finger
in the spinach dip.

Everything was finely orchestrated
down to the smallest detail.
The armchair preachers who came
out that night in numbers,
sucking on fat cigars.
The smell of too much aftershave.

A child in the dark was scolded
for something that he didn't do,
and the log tossed in the bonfire
resulted in a brief spatter of sparks,
an audible gasp from the crowd,

from the little old women
who clapped and howled like mad beasts,
creating much hysteria and pandemonium.
A gathering to justify the means.

What everyone thought sounded
like a Latin love song turned out to be
an ode to suffering.

And my God, Maria, there was even
a flag waving over a field of grain
to help us recognize who we've become.

All that was missing was the hammer and sickle,
a forge spitting hot blood.

From Fifty-Six Etymologies, No. Five

I met an American man in school at the old Karl Marx University where one of two remaining statues of Marx still stands, and we would meet at Karl when we met a large group. My American bought a hat with Communist buttons at the flea market and we took a picture of him with a bottle of wine in each hand—the hat on, cocked drunkenly—so he looked like our version of native.



kate bradley |
digital photography
8" by 10"

Untitled



| heather lynch
oil on canvas

Western Stream



susan felter |
pigment prints of digital montage images
5.25" by 6.5"

Despite Uncertainty



| annamarie leon
metal sculpture



irene kearney |
monotype

A Woman's Vision



| animile quispe
clay



A Woman's Vision (back)



animile quispe |
clay

Victoria Lucas



| courtney haney
oil on canvas
20" by 60"



sarah beth goncarova |
oil on canvas
28" by 40"

Self-Portrait Bust



| daniel choe
water clay
24" by 15" by 10"

River Boat Captain, Central Vietnam



gary iribarren |
digital photography
8" by 10"

Untitled



| veronica eng
watercolor on paper

Bees



kirsten rieke |
oil on canvas
40" by 30"

Untitled



| kirsten muckler
oil on canvas
30" by 40"

Untitled



emily fong |
digital photography
8.5" by 6"

Untitled



| kristin olson
digital photography
10" by 8"

Ethan Frome



knew what it
meant to live
with the mess
he'd made
with the sled
and the night
and the girl.

You broke
my nose,
so you don't get
to complain
that I don't
breathe right,
or about
the blood
on our floor.

Saguaro

The desert spreads before us, a brown blanket of dust punctuated by scrubby bushes. Fat Larry the cook sits beside me on the picnic table, waiting for the food truck and making up recipes whose only ingredients are government surplus food items—giant cans of sliced peaches, fat orange blocks of cheese. His latest masterpiece is a tuna casserole, which would be good if there were such a thing as government-surplus potato chips to sprinkle on top. Yesterday's lunch—a type of tostada using Indian fry bread instead of hardened tortillas—was one of his government surplus inventions, and good enough that I ate two of them.

Today's truck would bring us the usual mix—beans, bread, canned corn, milk powder, cereal. The people from Sells would come into the mission and pick up their portions, and Fat Larry would keep what was left for the day camp. I ask him what we would be eating if there were no truck, if the government in its beneficence didn't bring its leftovers out to the desert. I know the Tohono O'Odham have been here for centuries; that this is their original land—a fraction of it, anyway—but it seems as though nothing grows in this landscape except quiet children and hulking wrecks of disemboweled cars.

Fat Larry considers the question. He is silent for a long moment, but I'm not sure if it's because I've offended him, or if he's searching his ancestral memory for an answer. I wait, watching the day campers sweat in the sun. The reservation kids are nearly still—a quiet people made quieter by the heat of the midday sun—but the camp leaders, earnest white teenagers on a summer mission trip, squeal gleefully. Their blond ponytails fly as they lead the campers in a game of elbow tag under the canopy. They believe that if they're enthusiastic enough, the reservation kids will be infected by their spirit and suddenly become giggly and noisy, or at least run faster.

I turn to Larry. He shrugs, finally, his hands open in a sign of defeat. "I don't know. We've been getting food trucks out here for

as long as I can remember. There's saguaro fruit, of course. Then I guess you could hunt for javelinas or foxes. I know my grandfather used to plant corn and beans. They have long roots that can go down to where the water is hidden under the soil, so they always survive."

The game of elbow tag in front of us slows to a halt. It's too hot to run. Many of the campers are from different villages and don't know each other well enough to feel comfortable hooking elbows, and the leaders are getting frustrated by the campers' resistance. I know I am supposed to be up helping them, but I agree with the campers about both the heat and the discomfort of standing hooked to a person you barely know. I stay perched on the picnic table, admiring the leaders' persistence.

Finally, the girl in charge of shepherding the campers blows her whistle, a harsh blast in the near-silence. "To the art room!" she chirps. The campers file toward the building. It's one of the mission buildings, and the thick adobe walls keep the room cool. I hop off of the picnic table and begin to follow the small stragglers when Fat Larry speaks again.

"They didn't take that much land from us, compared to other tribes. We still own a portion of our original land. We have Baboquivari, where I'toi lives. Some tribes don't have their sacred sites, and don't even live on the land they came from." A lizard skitters across the ground beneath the picnic table. Larry stops, looks at it, and continues. "We're still here, but we didn't know how to be like the beans and corn. Our roots didn't go down deep enough to find the water and survive. So now we have basketball and diabetes and cocaine and government surplus food."

I don't know how to answer him. Perhaps he's accusing me; perhaps he's merely stating a fact. Basketball and government surplus food don't seem so bad, and anyway, I didn't take anyone's land. I shrug and walk toward the group of campers.

The other leaders are urging the children to join them in a raucous song. They are nearly around the corner of the art building, but I can still hear their cheerful blond voices. I marvel at their energy, today especially. We've been up since 5 a.m., but they're still going strong.

We were all quieter this morning upon awaking. There's something about the desert in the early morning; its tranquility is breathtaking. Even the blond teenagers were stilled by its magic. Fat Larry and a tribal elder had led us on an early morning trek away from the village to participate in the annual harvest of the saguaro fruit. Armed with buckets and poles made of dried saguaro ribs, we walked through the brush, dodging cholla plants and listening to Larry instruct us on the proper technique.

"It's important that you don't go tramping around swinging your sticks at the fruit carelessly. This harvest is sacred to us. We try to gather the fruit in such a way as to show gratitude for what we have been given and to respectfully ask for the things we need."

The saguaro stood before us, tall and proud in the dawn, resembling the people after which they were named. We listened intently, knowing we were lucky to participate in this sacrosanct moment.

The elder, Samuel, explained the steps of the harvest as we walked. "We're going to start with a song this morning. This is a traditional song, thanking the Creator for the saguaro and all it gives us." He took out a small rattle and began a chant. The deep voices of the normally reticent men resonated in the morning air. They faced the horizon, and it was clear they were not singing to us or for us. Even Larry looked different in this light, no longer Fat Larry, the camp cook, but a man and an elder.

After the song ended, we picked our way through what Larry informed us was a saguaro forest. It wasn't much of a forest by Anglo standards. The plants were about 25 feet apart, with only scrub and chollas—called "jumping cacti" for the way they adhered to pant legs or socks—between.

Larry stopped us in front of a tall saguaro with a cluster of fruit on top. "You have to bless yourselves with the first one." We looked at him expectantly for more explanation, but Larry, like many O'odham, spoke in spurts punctuated by minutes of silence.

I lifted my hand to cross myself, fruit between my fingers—native tradition meets mission influence—but Larry showed us how to open the fruit, take a bit of the soft meat, and rub it over our hearts. The pulp was cool against my skin. I wanted to pray, but I didn't know to whom. The Anglo God of the missions? I'toi, the

Creator? The saguaro themselves? Standing in the desert dawn, I didn't feel like any of them were mine to appropriate. Samuel, the tribal elder, must have read my thoughts.

"Just ask for good things," he whispered. "For yourself, and for the people around you." I looked at the people around me: Larry, Samuel, the teenagers. Beyond them stood the saguaros, their arms upraised as if in supplication to some unseen prickly god. The saguaros needed rain; the elders, wisdom; the rest of us, stillness.

The movement of the sun broke the spell. It was definitely daytime, now. There was a harvest to be collected, and the daycampers would be arriving in a few hours. We ate the fruit we held in our hands, leaving the husk on the ground with the red interior pointing toward the sky, as Samuel directed us, to ask for rain. Rapidly, we took poles in hand, moving from plant to plant, knocking the ripe fruit into buckets. Whispers became giggles and then shouts of laughter. When our buckets were full, we began the hike back to the mission, where Samuel's wife and the other O'Odham women would clean and cook the fruit, boiling it into a soft mass that would become jelly, syrup, or wine. Fat Larry recited saguaro fruit recipes to us as we walked, ending with peanut-butter-and-saguaro-jelly sandwiches as we reached the mission.

This morning seems years away now, as I herded the littlest campers through their day, passing out crayons and scissors. From the art room, I can hear the women outside in the courtyard, singing ancient songs as they stir, soak, and knead the saguaro fruit. Their voices rise and fall in unfamiliar patterns, a string of phonics punctuated by the tapping of large wooden spoons against giant copper kettles. Inside the art room, some of the younger children are singing along under their breath as they color, half-humming, half-mumbling the strings of syllables as they draw racecars and cartoon characters.

The sharp bark of a horn echoes through the camp. It is the food truck. The women leave the long wooden spoons in the hands of their teenage daughters or ancient grandmothers and shuffle out of the courtyard to line up for this week's rations of mashed potato

powder and canned stewed tomatoes. Their songs hushed, they wait quietly for what is to be given to them, knowing they cannot get back what was already taken away.

What I Would Say To God

In the minutes before I sleep, I pray, and in this prayer I say:

Dear lord,

I'm tired. I'm sick of love and sick of being lovesick for individuals who are not lovesick over me. I'm closer to crying when I watch *Gone with the Wind* or *Singing in the Rain*. I don't sing much anymore. I don't pray enough, I know. My job isn't the best and I know you have better things planned for me, so I'm not upset. What makes me upset though is I lost my keys again. If you could, please give me a hint tomorrow when I'm looking around for them. Also tell Bev to get off my back about backing into her car. It was an accident and you know that. She should, too. This may be a little personal but I've been curious about this lately: Did your bones click along the spikes when they were driven into your hands or was it a clean break? Sorry, probably not appropriate to ask that. Sorry, I'm not good at this type of thing. I just want to be there with you, you know. Not as in also crucified. I can't honestly say I want or wanted that, but I think it helps to have a visual. Seems more real that way, more stunning. As if that bloody blossom of your palm cupping the inserted metal were a way of understanding why I bump into my neighbors' cars when I've been drinking or why the kid at the corner house was found face down in his neighbor's backyard without clothes on. I don't mean to sound condemnatory or critical. Just need something to see. Need to witness your face wince while you most likely mutter a prayer to your Father to save you, to make it less painful, although you didn't mean you weren't willing to continue. I'm less of a man. You're more. So when I say I want to see your side spill out, blood folding around the guard's spear, I mean my hands couldn't hold on to each other tighter. I mean if I didn't pray as if an ocean were tearing me away from the shoreline or I want to say butterflies do this when they fold their wings together or it would be a sin not to touch you, place my ear on your lips and listen for an ocean. Your skull must be made of music. Your tongue the indigo of my dreams. So I pray you might need me the way I would press your mouth to my ear hoping for the miracle of sound.

Oranges

I'll print out these memories
like photographs
and hang them on my fridge
next to the artwork and shopping lists
shiny rectangles of nostalgia
and regret

My sister
with tiny teeth
that she wants to trade for quarters
hands sticky with glitter glue
and coated with backyard dirt
surrounded by toy horses
grinning at me with popsicle-sticky lips

Why didn't I try
to squeeze those smiles out of her more often,
like juicing those oranges on the countertop?
It would take dozens to fill one glass
and still I would be thirsty.

The Gargoyles Rebel

From their lofty cathedral perches,
activists spread the word:

*We will no longer be gutter slaves,
a conduit for medieval ideas!*

They agree to end the boredom
of enforced utility, service with a snarl
unnoticed for centuries by the human crawl

below. Through the next rain,
the gargoyles swallow hard
and then seal tight their mouths,
becoming more like us—

pressured to bursting, cracking,
teetering on the edge.

Lost And Found: Searching For Identity On The Streets Of San Jose

At ten o'clock Saturday morning a star was born; the moment Ian "Chili" Evans walked in the door, he was an instant celebrity.

He stood out from the rest of the men in the Montgomery Street Inn homeless shelter as he strutted across the lobby, a young, walking hybrid of John Travolta's slick coif in *Grease* and Arnold's pre-gubernatorial biceps.

After a quick round of greetings in the lobby, Chili came to rest on a battered wooden bench to pose for the free portrait sessions being held that morning by photography students from Santa Clara University.

Several female students blushed as he removed his white v-neck t-shirt to reveal a sculpted set of abs and an impressive array of tattoos that covered every available patch of his tanned skin.

Grinning devilishly, he held out his fists to display the latest ink: Old English letters etched across his knuckles spelling "STR8 HATE," a mantra developed over years of living on the streets, he said, years in which he discovered that "Chili" was his favorite person to be.

Chili is one of 7,200 homeless individuals in Santa Clara County who call the streets or shelters of the Silicon Valley home.

Stuck in a sea of stereotypes, they are known as panhandlers or beggars, drug addicts or prostitutes, criminals or lazy welfare-suckers.

But the only thing most of them have in common is the one thing they lack: A home.

Identity is a fluid concept for those stuck on the margins, for those who rely on a street education for discernment and are limited by a lack of available opportunities.

Some, like Chili, are pulled to the streets, while others are pushed by circumstances in or out of their control. And each person copes differently with the crazy reality of an unhoused life.

One Saturday morning in the dingy, pungent lobby of the Montgomery Street Inn, over thirty homeless men and women stared at blank pages of cardstock, ballpoint pen in hand and a simple prompt in mind: "Who am I?"

SAN MATEO the center of the universe where this man
was forced THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA where my skin was TORTURED
I AM A MAN OF CONSTANT SEARCH & WHERE I LAY MY HEAD IS
HOMER. I DON'T STEAL I BARROW, WORDS CAN BE BROKEN BUT SC
CAN BEATS TO MY PRETTY BABY KIDS - oh how I LOVE YOU - SO
DADDY'S FINED NOW - IT'S OK. DON'T YA KNOW

Don Eugene
"Ch 7/1"

Photography students were drawn like moths to a flame to Chili, who basked in the glow of tungsten lights. Pulling on his plastic shades, he flexed his muscles and hit every pose in the body-building competition repertoire.

He took requests, too, and there was one with whom he could not comply: Laughed his friend AJ, "Nobody can make Chili sit still."

Students whispered under their breath, attempting to guess which drug Chili had used that morning, causing his eyes to glaze over and his legs to bounce and twitch.

Before he left, Chili asked if he could leave an address to have his portraits delivered to because he never knows when he might be locked up again.

He explained this reality unapologetically, with a smile and a shrug, as if this was a perfectly normal rationalization.

For the students, this was a surprising show of nonchalance towards the reality of prison. For Chili, this was life.

You could call him irresponsible, or even reckless. He calls himself free.

My name is Dreamer and I do tattoos on the streets.
I would never give up the life! He knows real.

Sitting quietly on a foldout chair, Dreamer embodies the essence of street youth. He speaks softly and politely, but with authority, as a man secure in his place in the world.

But his light blue eyes betray a rebellious streak, boring holes in each lens with the intensity of his gaze. They darted from camera to camera, but more often towards the door, where his friends waited patiently for the boss to finish his portrait session.

On any given day, you can find Dreamer and his friends Chris and Warren sitting on a wooden bench in the parking lot of the shelter, swapping stories and enjoying the bonds of street brotherhood.

"We're close," Dreamer had quipped earlier that morning when Warren swung his legs onto his lap and wrapped his arms around Dreamer's neck, sticking his tongue within centimeters of Dreamer's left ear. The men erupted with laughter as Dreamer uttered a homophobic slur and pushed Warren away.

The formation of clans, or in some cases gangs, is not uncommon on the streets, where having someone watch your back can be an essential tool for survival.

A tool, that is, if that person is someone you would trust with all of your possessions, or even your life.

With so much at stake, some opt to face the world alone, isolating themselves physically and socially. Others, like Dreamer, Warren, and Chris, seek companionship as a way to protect themselves and cope with the loneliness that can accompany homelessness.

Some even forge romantic relationships. At the fringes of the boys club was Brandon, one-half of the only couple that took part in the photo shoot that day.

He and his fiancée, Karen, had recently become engaged. She glowed as she wrapped her arms around his neck and displayed a simple but elegant diamond ring.

He advertised his affection on his neck, in the form of a tattooed-likeness of Karen that stretched from his shoulder to his ear. They were mum about their specific wedding plans, perhaps due to a lack of money or lack of certainty about when they could set a date.

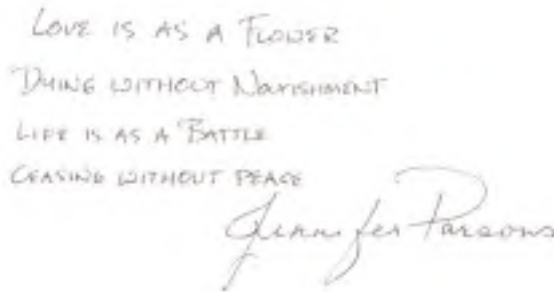
To be sure, the unpredictable nature of street life seemed to add another daunting layer to the already complex process of plan-

ning for the future.

On the streets, finding friends or romantic partners that can be relied on is a difficult task indeed; social groups are usually fluid as members move on and off the streets or relocate to different shelters, neighborhoods, or cities.

More common still are ties severed by decisions that land the homeless behind bars. And Brandon, it seemed, had a knack for getting into trouble.

When the students returned to the shelter nearly three weeks later, they discovered that Brandon had been imprisoned, again.



A petite woman, her shoulder-length blonde hair still wet from the showers, appeared in the doorway. She was breathing heavily and her gaping mouth revealed a set of crooked teeth and a severely misaligned jaw that gave her face a lopsided look.

"She's wearing a dress," noted one middle-aged man as he elbowed the man next to him. "You know what that means," he laughed, his thick black eyebrows raised suggestively.

Her reputation, it seemed, preceded her; Jennifer is a prostitute, and she is well-known amongst the men at the shelter.

She started selling her body several years ago for the money, and in doing so, Jennifer chose a road well-traveled by homeless individuals.

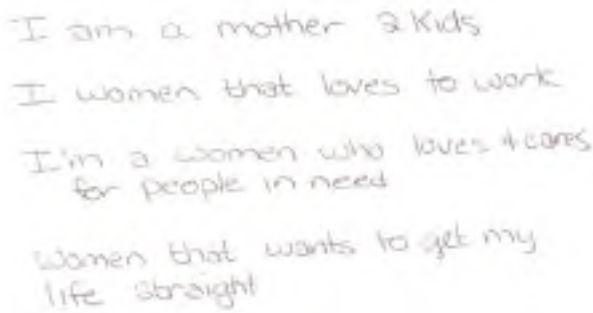
Like many, she faces a puzzling paradox; she cannot gain employment without an address and telephone number, but she cannot afford such luxuries without being employed.

Several years in the sex industry gave her many bruises, both emotionally and physically, she said with a crooked grin. I

asked why, after all this, she is still smiling.

"That's what I do, but it's not who I am," she said defensively, leaning back in her foldout chair and crossing her legs. And then, leaning forward and gesturing with calloused hands, she described her passion, her escape, and her true identity as a poet.

After a lengthy indoor and outdoor photo session, she stood in the dimly-lit room to recite one of her poems. Then, she thanked the students for making her feel pretty for the first time in a very, very long time.



I am a mother 2 kids
I women that loves to work
I'm a women who loves & cares
for people in need
women that wants to get my
life straight

The last time Lovey, 38, had been in front of the lens for was her mugshot. The small, pretty Hispanic woman, she sat timidly on the chair with her hands clasped in her lap and peered at the students through soft brown eyes swimming with tears.

She hoped to send her portrait to her daughter, Christine, who is 20 years old, living in San Diego, and unaware that her mother is out of jail and back on the streets.

Her story is simple, but tragic; Lovey had been through a drug rehabilitation program, got clean, relapsed, and now hoped to achieve sobriety again. This time, she said, it would be for good.

A student asked what Lovey wanted to convey to her daughter through the photo. Her eyes welled up with tears again as she tried to explain in broken English the pain she has caused her daughter throughout the years.

Lovey was a mother; a good mother. But when she started using, everything changed. Now, she hoped her daughter would accept her as she is—broken and battered, but still capable of love.

In the end, she just wanted her daughter to know that she

was okay, Lovey whispered finally, slowly, as if unsure that her resolve to live straight was strong enough to withstand the temptation of drugs again.

Lovey is not alone; the streets of San Jose are brimming with alcoholics and drug addicts of varying degrees of recovery.

Some, like Chili and his friend AJ, see alcoholism as inevitable, as normal even, and as the bottom of an abyss from which there is no escape.

With their whole lives ahead of them, these individuals choose to remain static, stuck in the rut of chemical dependence and in the identity society assigns them as addicts.

"[AJ] looked me in the eyes and said, 'I'm addicted to alcohol, and it is going to kill me,'" said student Paul Andrews. "I was speechless. He just accepted it and wasn't going to do anything to change it."

Whether alcohol and drugs were the cause of the homeless condition or the preferred method of self-medication for these individuals, in the end, a conscious decision to rise above the addiction is the only cure.

Sometimes it takes a wake-up call. For 50 year-old surfer dude "Rock E.," it was three grandchildren he has never met. For Lovey, it was a jail sentence and the love of her daughter.

But asking for help is no easy task, as many users are often faced with feelings of shame or helplessness. For 48 year-old Manuel, the decision to reach out was a long time coming.

"People think men are supposed to eat steel and spit bullets," he said. Now, he hopes, nothing will prevent him from drying out and getting his life back.

His thick-framed glasses obscure deep brown eyes, and wisps of long, gray-black hair emerge from beneath a brightly colored, hand-woven beanie. A bullet casing strung on black cord encircles his neck and came to rest on the front of his light gray Bullwinkle sweatshirt.

He spoke softly but eloquently to the students, leaving them with the words of wisdom he imparted on his own eight children long ago: "Life is fun if you take care of it."

But perhaps the most important lesson Manuel taught was the one he lived; it is never too late to become the person you always wanted to be.

Whatever gave Manuel, Rock E., and Lovey the propensity to change, these brave souls refused to let addiction become their defining characteristic. And, in the process, they shifted their concept of identity from the past and the present to the future.



my name is Nate
God's Given us a Break
He Surrounded me with
His Love
That Came From up ABOVE
I see things in a Different
way now
& like a guy named Christ
He saved our lives -
Because that's what he does
to give us strength.
God Blesses us with every
STEP WE TAKE
SO Remember that he makes
NO MISTAKES

Nate

Laughing, Nate stood stiffly and recited the Alcoholics Anonymous creed with his right hand in the air. "My name is Nate, and I'm an alcoholic," he dictated nasally, then sat back down slowly and shook his head.

"I can't stand that crap," he said emphatically, pounding one strong, thick fist on the turquoise laminate countertop. "Why would I stand here and say I am one? I don't want to be one, so why would I stand there and reinforce that in my mind?"

Thus began a rant that would continue for ten more minutes, during which he animatedly described his own rehabilitation program, which was centered around using the power of positive thinking to help people believe that they were capable of moving beyond addiction.

Street life is rough, he admitted, but it also shoves the con-

sequences of your choices in plain view. Here, Nate has discovered who he isn't – an alcoholic.

But he has also discovered who he is: A “street therapist,” a disciple of the Lord, and a light of optimism to the downtrodden.

Our conversation ranged from painkillers to astrological signs to the benefits of being a half-Hawaiian, quarter-Japanese, quarter-Latin American “mutt”: (“nobody really knows how to identify me, so I get to choose.”)

A military haircut and a tattoo that covers his left earlobe gave his visage a hardened look, but the skin around his eyes crinkled affably as a wide smile crossed his face.

We had just reached his favorite topic of conversation: Education. Gesturing passionately, he describes his on-again, off-again status as a student at a San Francisco community college.

Nate is not the only student amongst the men at the Montgomery Street Inn shelter, where residents are encouraged to work during the day and the dormitories are separated for workers and non-workers.

Most days, 32 year-old Jesse leaves the shelter at dawn, clad in turquoise medical scrubs concealed beneath layers of shirts and coats. Then, he begins the trek to the local Institute for Business and Technology, where he is training to become a medical assistant.

A wispy black beard and moustache obscured Jesse's face on portrait day, but the sparkle in his eyes betrayed his youth.

As he spoke to a group of students, he fingered a fleece blanket adorned with a pastel camouflage pattern, wrapped neatly around a Bible with multicolored bookmarks bursting from its top end.

It's the blanket he hopes to wrap around his baby, he said, when the baby comes.

Jesse and Nate may be down on their luck, but their dissatisfaction with their shared identity as homeless men pushes them to take an active role in determining who they will be in the future.

Becoming a medical assistant is only the first step for Jesse, who said he intended to move his way up to a more fulfilling role in the medical field to create a better life for his unborn child.

A life without limits is what Nate intends to pursue, and if he fails, it won't be for a lack of trying. If dreams were dimes, Nate

would be a millionaire.

A small Hispanic man with a handlebar moustache sat calmly on a foldout chair in the stuffy, makeshift portrait room.

Even his eyes smiled as he beamed at the students, who fluttered about to get a portrait that would somehow, maybe, capture the essence of the man who sat before them.

He left with a bounce in his step and a tear in his eye, shaking the hand of each and every student he passed on his way to express his gratitude in a language that crosses all barriers: love.

And to the world, he left a note:

Hi
I am a man.
and I am humble.
But I am still a person
that still can Love. So
Please don't put me down.
Only God Can Do
That.
Yours Truly

Satan Mops the Floor at St. Charles Catholic Grade School

My favorite name for myself is Angel of the Abyss,
though there was a time when I preferred Apollyon,
or Father of Lies, or Belial, which is used interestingly
in the Dead Sea Scrolls when the sons of light
are described as waging war with the sons of darkness.
I think about these names when I stop at Denny's
on my way to work and order the Lumberjack Slam,
which includes bacon strips, sausage, hash browns,
grilled ham, eggs, and buttermilk pancakes.
Licking the sticky syrup from my fingers,
I do not chide God for having cast me unceremoniously
from heaven; for having stripped me of my sardius,
topaz, beryl, onyx, and jasper; for creating me
in all perfection except for my iniquities; for bringing forth
the fire in the midst of me; for saying I will be tossed
forever into the sulphur lake with the beast
and the false prophet. For what crime?
Let's not forget that other overreaction when Eve
took one single bite out of an apple. Yes, I have accepted
that I am the beast of the earth, the red dragon,
the blasphemous tongue, the unclean spirit.
Not that the children at St. Charles seem to mind.
If once I was the anointed cherub, now I mop
the floors and smell the ammonia as it lifts into the air.
And though a second-grader collapsed this month
in the hallway and was foaming at the mouth,
convulsing, am I the one to blame? Do I have seven heads
and ten horns? And did I do anything more than whisper
that suggestion to Judas Iscariot? And in any case
who really put me up to it? Each day I push this mop
and ask the same question every working man asks:
Who truly runs the show?

The Curator

“The curator will make decisions regarding what objects to collect...”
—Wikipedia

Afterwards, a raucous auction ensued:
I claimed Dad’s lucky golf hat, you took
the tie that still smelled like Old Spice.
You wanted the t-shirt with armpit stains,
I took socks that he wore when he died.
Dressed up in his clothes, we impersonated him,
smoking imaginary Camels, talking football.
I fought to be the foremost expert on Dad’s life—
careless, you filled in gaps and spaces
with made-up facts, falsified truths.
Now, we carry our past on slumped shoulders
like war survivors. When I wear Gram’s silver
bracelet, the thick clasp leaves a welt and
you ask: “Isn’t it weird to wear a dead person’s
stuff?” After all this time, I am still the curator,
carefully dusting off artifacts with a toothbrush,
preserving them the way only I can. And you
the museum visitor, leaving your streaky
fingerprints on the glass, despite the warning:
Do not touch.

Sleepless, Silent

I wasn't surprised when my mother told me she had trouble sleeping in the ICU.

"It's too loud here," she told me on the phone. "There are monitors beeping all night long, and people are always up. But the nurses are nice, and your father has been here, so it's not all bad."

"How long are you going to be there?" I asked.

"A few more days. They're just looking at some of my test results and watching my cough."

"Are you sure it's not serious?"

"No, I don't think so; don't worry about it too much. I'll be home soon."

Insomnia, more than anything, has created an opportunity for me to escape from reality. Lying there, motionless, in the middle of a night, I can organize the chaos of thoughts and evaluate my position in life. It is the portal to Descartes' mind trap which requires me to validate my existence. It is the absence of Morpheus.

The particular diagnosis for me is titled sleep-onset insomnia, which corresponds to an inability to fall asleep in an appropriate amount of time. The National Sleep Foundation describes insomnia as a symptom caused by "stress, anxiety, depression, disease, pain, medications, sleep disorders, poor sleep habits ... [and] sleep environment and health habits," and it says the disease is more common in women than in men. Sleep-onset insomnia is frequently associated with anxiety disorders, so many of the treatments available are prescribed by psychologists or psychiatrists and are usually just pills.

I have always had trouble falling asleep. Even on nights when I am exhausted, I find myself spending hours thinking too much, not being able to calm my brain into the submission of sleep. This condition has its pros and cons: I get creative ideas, but at the price of feeling exhausted most of the next day. You would probably see me online late at night, looking around and ready for conversation

to bide the time. You may see me reading, immersing myself in a story because it's easier to shut down my brain when it can focus its attention. If you see me early in the mornings, you will see my red eyes. You will never see me napping.

My mother had a similar problem. She spent most of her nights on a blue leather chair, half sleeping and mostly watching Westerns, a John Wayne fan. She found sleeping upstairs too humid and uncomfortable, especially in the thick heat of a Sacramento summer, so she slept in front of the TV downstairs. She bought the chair for my dad's birthday one year, but he never seemed to sit in it, so it became her worry chair. You could see the frantic motherhood worry in her forehead, and you could count the seriousness of the situation she brooded about in her wrinkles. The fretting didn't go away on the occasion that she fell asleep in that blue chair; she would still kick her legs and toss her torso like a dead spider. I remember one night I was up late with her watching *Diagnosis Murder* on PAX, and we heard the pop pop pop of gunshots close to our house. She had two other kids out on the town enjoying that night with their friends, and both of them were home in fifteen minutes by her request. She had that sort of power over us, the ability to use her worrying and lack of sleep against us, and if we defied that, we would be responsible for her well-being.

The rest of my family has more luck in the sleep department. My father in particular has a circadian rhythm that is more accurate than calling in POPCORN to get the time. At nine o'clock he falls asleep. It doesn't matter if he is in bed or not, he will still fall asleep at nine. I have found him in a number of different places after nine, sleeping away. My favorite is in his computer office, where he falls asleep while teaching his online classes. My brothers also fall asleep more easily than my mother or me. It's a fun experiment to put on a movie that is only somewhat interesting, like *Field of Dreams*, and time how fast the room falls asleep (Note: the quickest experiments are done with the Science Channel). As to who will fall asleep first, I would suggest always betting on those lying on the couch. Do not bet on me.

In high school, I found solace in staying up late at night, especially on Saturdays. I enjoyed my midnight Lucky Charms, watching my *Dragon Ball Z* cartoons, or sneaking leftover beers as

times to be on top of the world. On Saturday nights, I could do whatever I wanted because the rest of the world was getting sleep or going out. I had the opportunity to be as crazy and weird as I wanted. But when my mom started staying up in her chair more often, I found my nights completely interrupted. I had to hide my true nocturnal self when she was awake and limit my activities to the inconspicuous internet while she dozily watched clichéd Western train robberies. I felt irritated to lose the power of being up alone. This time invasion encouraged me to express my true self elsewhere, and so I began staying over at a friend's house more often. My mom didn't like my new desire for freedom, but she picked her battles on when I had to come home. On New Year's, I wanted to stay out until at least two o'clock, spending time at my friend Kaitlin's house.

"You can go, but you have to be home by eleven thirty," she demanded.

"But I won't even get to celebrate New Year's with my friends," I snapped back.

"I don't want you driving late because there are going to be a lot of drunk drivers out there." Her worry was infuriating. So much so that I stayed home that night and pouted right in front of her on the couch. She kept insisting that I go, but I said things like, "It's not even worth it" in snappy teenage tones. We watched Dick Clark's plastic face in silence. We could hear jeers and firecrackers from our neighborhood, the gibberish of the New Year's song that no one knows the words to, and the panic of my dog in the backyard.

"I'm sorry your night wasn't that great," she said a while after the ball had dropped. "I love you, goodnight." Then she left to sleep upstairs.

Eventually I learned to accept that my mother and I shared the same sleeping patterns. We never really talked about it, but on these late nights, she would occasionally ask why I was still up, and I would turn the question right back, to which we would both shrug. Silence was a big part of our relationship, but it was the kind of silence that enables people to mutually agree to enjoy together. The night of my senior prom, I came home around two thirty to find my mom asleep with a documentary about Katharine Hepburn on TV. I laid down on the couch still in my dress clothes so

she would notice that I got home okay and she woke me up around five so that I would move to my bed.

The worst nights of sleep of my life occurred in the days following a phone call. I was at college when my brother phoned to say that my mom had had an aneurism. I had seen her just the day before; I had gone home to celebrate her freedom from the ICU ward. My roommate came to give me a ride back to Santa Clara, and she had hid in my brother's room to not be seen in her hospital gown and her crazy, unwashed hair.

"I don't want to embarrass you," she had said as I was hugging her goodbye.

"Mom, you'd never embarrass me." I felt proud that I could tell her that. I went back to school only to get the call at five in the morning. to return to Sacramento by Amtrak while my mom had brain surgery. I was received by my extended family, all of us concerned and cramming into a small waiting room. The all-day surgery was declared a success, and I was able to see my now-bald mother sleeping in the ICU. The following days we would learn that she was responsive only sporadically to what we told her, rolling her eyes and squeezing our hands. I doubt any of it stuck in her memory; she was fading in and out like those long nights we shared staring at cowboys. After a few weeks, her squeezing seemed stronger, and we were hopeful that she could recover to her old self again.

But when I showed up one night to sit next to her bed and read to the rhythm of pulses and beeps, I was informed that she was hemorrhaging in the brain again. The next surgery was in Redwood City, and it, too, was declared a success. But we found my mother less responsive than ever. Our hope hung on for a few weeks before we found ourselves debating the dignity of keeping her alive (Note: if you want family tension, try telling your family that you think your mother should die). I found this process to be utterly exhausting, and insomnia was morphing into the wild beast of depression. I was drinking alcohol heavily to skip the late night fret fest. We all eventually agreed to let her pass on, and it was a bitter relief to end the 54-day hospital waiting game.

It took about a year for my grief to grow into gratitude. I

started to smile again, and I remembered the values that my mother taught me. Family first. Be accepting of others. Be patient.

Staring at the ceiling grew back into my creative process, my nights full of uncultivated ideas and rampant journal writing.

If you see me at my house in the evenings, you will see me watching TV with my siblings and my father. You will see me turn on the Science channel, and you will see me watch my family go to sleep as scientists try to split atoms, turn on and off bird genes to remake dinosaurs, or debate the origin of the cosmos. I will be talking silently to my mother after that. I am the one in the blue chair.

Tides

Maybe it was because of the drinks,
or because someone had overestimated her age,
but she stands in front of the mirror

in her two hundred dollar shoes,
leaning in over the sink counter littered with
eyelash curlers, curling irons, flat irons, mascara,

widening her eyes as she raises her hands to the glass,
pressing them into their own image
until she can no longer tell where the seam is.

She remembers a book she read once
about a girl and a dream and a looking glass
and pushes further, climbing onto the counter

as she watches her arms
then legs
disappear into the other side.

A silent ocean faces her
as she tosses her shoes to the side,
peels off her dress, her underwear,

and stands naked in front of the waves.
Eyes closed, she dives in
and swims until she can no longer breathe,

watches her makeup wash away,
her toenails and fingernails turn to sand,
her skin become seafoam,

and her bones crumble to the bottom,
arrange themselves as coral,
begin to breathe again.

The Show

You sit in the Neptune Theatre waiting for the overhead lights to dim. You look beautiful, wearing a green silk dress that I have never seen on you before. You are eating popcorn—no butter, I am certain—bringing each puffed kernel to your mouth one by one, watching the lights dance across the velvet curtain. Your shoulders look tense tonight, and my fingers itch to rub across them, to mold and unwind the knotted muscle.

Earlier today when you were out—we were out—window-shopping, you strode ahead and I had to walk quickly to keep you in sight, dodging through throngs of early Christmas shoppers. It was below 50 degrees, and I wondered if you were cold, in your light wool coat. When I found you again, you were standing still in front of a Macy's window display. Your coat was flapping open in the wind, exposing the smooth angles of your collarbone. You were staring into the glass, as if hypnotized by the plastic holly garlands and constellations of twinkling lights. We stood there for two minutes, the crowd flowing between us like a river that I could not cross. When you moved on, I, too, stared at the window display, trying to discern which of the objects had caught your attention.

I have already wrapped your Christmas present. I have not forgotten. It is in my pocket now, and my fingers toy with the white satin ribbon, turning the small box over and over in my hand. I imagine striding up the theatre aisle and sliding into the seat next to you, the box held out to you as a token, my peace offering. You will recognize the gift inside when you see it—the same bracelet I slipped around your slender wrist two years ago, today. I imagine the sharp intake of your breath, your eyes taking in what you never expected to see again.

At night when I stand outside your house, I see you moving about the kitchen, your hands inside the yellow gloves you use to wash the dishes. Soapsuds glisten on your forearms, and you push your hair out of your face using the dry crook of your elbow. Sometimes you stare out the window, in a daze again, that same

expression on your face. Why do you wash dishes with fear in your eyes?

The curtain should be rising now—any second, any second—but it does not move. There is a commotion somewhere behind us, near the entrance to our wing of the theatre. Your head snaps around to look, and for an instant your eyes catch mine and hold them. I always forget how blue your irises really are. The blue is what always brings me back, here, to you. Inside the blue, fear and anticipation dance. I turn.

The first policeman shoves me to the ground, my cheek hard against the plush red carpet. I imagine it is the soft fuzz that gathers below your ribcage. There is a sharp crack as my shoulder hits the floor. The show has started. I breathe in as the second policeman nudges my temple with the cold steel of his gun, then more cold metal encircles my wrists and snaps closed. I am pulled to my feet, and the whole time, I feel you watching me. This time, your eyes don't leave me. You are standing half-in, half-out of your seat, crouched as if to flee. As I am pulled toward the exit, away from you, you slump back, huddle in the arms of the man next to you—your boyfriend. The lights dim. The show is over. The show has just begun.

Dash Against Darkness

When I negotiate for compass points, my argument's a bi-ased vanity. The western hills of Kettering disappoint, and I was born with sunlight in the East. If to the south blues shiver all night long, the Eastside parking lots pick up the sound. If to the north the churches shake with song, the Eastside factories listen and resound. And if tall buildings still light up downtown, the lights out East are never dark or dim. We meditate beneath the lunar round and in the morning, lift the sun again. But if you think my compass is askew: Listen. The old die. And the born are new.

* * *

"I've been waiting. I've waited. For so long. Can we send?
With a dove?"

"A pigeon."

"A dove?"

"A pigeon."

"Okay then. With a pigeon."

"..."

"Is it going to be alright?"

"..."

* * *

Gerald sat up in bed.

His Margery had left him. Her Gerald was left behind.

The truth of this fact was numbingly clear as he examined his arm in the mirror. No name on the arm. No name in the reflection. Just himself. Where had she gone?

Now in the kitchen. Boiling the water for ramen. Old flowers, dead for a long time, sitting in a vase on the windowsill above the sink. He tossed them in the garbage. It was still morning, barely. But he felt tired. Why did he feel tired? He rubbed his eyes. Somehow, he knew it was going to be a long day.

Gerald's clothes, scattered on the living room floor. Margery's clothes, folded neatly in boxes in the attic.

Back in the bathroom. Rubbing his eyes. Looking at them in the mirror. Red somehow. From his rubbing. Or maybe his allergies. It was late September, the beginning of autumn, but after a couple frosts and a rainy spell (clouds straight out to nowhere) the leaves were already turning. Already falling. Dazzling rivers of crimson and gold that got swallowed by the rivers of asphalt curb. But why couldn't it be spring, with finned maple seeds helicoptering down? Why not summer, at the Farmers Market with coriander smoke puffing up along the aisle? Why not? Why wasn't his Margery here? Why had she left him? Why had she gone?

Only one thing to do.

Gerald turned on the shower, and when the steam had grown so dense that it coated the mirror and made him into a wraithly shape, he undressed and stepped in. The water banged against his head. He ran his arms slick against the skin. Wiped the water back, but little trickles still wound down his forehead and found his eyes. He turned into the stream, open-mouthed. He gargled the falling water. The water bubbled out like an overflowing drainage pipe. No one to ridicule him for this. No one to tease him or taunt him as hopelessly unfastidious. The house was empty except for Gerald and the noise he made.

Only one thing to do.

He opened the window to let in a breath of the cold outside air. He looked out into his backyard. Grass gleaming in the gray rain, beneath the gray sky. Pink and pastel orange leaves clinging, but just barely, to the pear tree. The red tips and numbs of his beets poking at an angle from the dirt. The chain link fence. Behind that, poplar trees, yellow, with fast bark, wrinkled bark. Behind, the neighbor's yard. Someone played R&B very loudly. Why don't they turn it up louder? he thought. He thought he saw someone dancing on the other side of a yellow window, but it was all hazy in the rain. Why don't they come outside and dance? Gerald shut the window, shut off the shower, and stepped out onto the pink bathmat. It dried his feet. He toweled his head dry and wiped the mirror clean. He shaved and looked at his arm. He toweled himself dry. Every last bit of rangy chest hair. He slapped on some stinging aftershave, wiped Old Spice across his armpits, toweled his heavy

crotch some more. Pulled the towel between his buttocks, then horizontal across his back. It's so hard to get dry, he thought. He dressed. From the kitchen, something hissed and sputtered, then spat like static. It was the pot of ramen boiling over.

A pigeon landed on the gutter outside. "You have to seek her out."

Only one thing to do.

He'd have to go outside.

He was all alone in the shower steam, in the rainy day. He had to go out and find her.

* * *

Gerald stepped out onto his porch.

He was afraid.

The roof hung over the porch and framed the front yard, and the gray rain made a neat curtain, grim and translucent, for a riot of fallen leaves. They sparkled like diamonds but drifted like mote, doomed. He saw empty black streets and lustrous fire hydrants. Some kids stamped through a puddle up the way and sang a song they'd memorized together, but Gerald was terrified.

It was a feeling. Would he ever see his house again? The lock asked him this. The key rotated against its catch, and he felt a slight torque, small but metallic and firm enough to slide the dead-bolt home. No, probably not, said the key. He turned right onto the sidewalk and started walking away. He looked back two houses down. From here, his own house seemed to sag and say "good-bye."

Gerald didn't want to go alone; he was horrified to think he might go alone. What if I don't find her? What if she's hidden? What if she doesn't want me to find her? Or what if I get lost on the way?

It was almost enough to make him turn back.

Amity, Gerald thought. Amity will come with me. So he turned toward Amity's house. He walked past the church parking lot, packed with rusting cars. They had gathered for an old priest's funeral. He reached a corner where a car pulled up to the Drive-Thru liquor store, blasting Gloria Gaynor. He continued, and as he walked, he thought of Amity.

Gerald had known Amity ever since they were children growing up on the Eastside. Sometimes Gerald had ridden his trike over to Amity's and the two had made mudpies in the back yard ruts where the puddles were deep and chocolaty. Not much later, Amity's mother would escort her to Gerald's house, where his older brother watched them both for the evening while the parents went out on the town. Of course, Gerald and Amity hadn't seen each other as much later on, when Amity went to college and Gerald into the factory, but he'd visited her often, and on one trip, she'd introduced him to Margery.

Amity had been a bridesmaid at their wedding, and so many years later, the three of them had often gotten together to play cards or see a movie.

Gerald walked under the overpass and Amity's house swung into view, a two-story, aluminum-sided tower sandwiched between daisy-choked vacant lots. Something was off, however; the lights were dark. Strange, Gerald thought. Amity was usually home on a Tuesday. He walked up to the porch and rang the doorbell. He waited. The house creaked above him, around him. It groaned sternly, like a security guard's bored repetition that "the building is closed; you'll have to come back tomorrow." Gerald waited, studied the dark shadows in the windows, and tried again. Still, groans then silence. Gerald walked around to the side of the house and knocked on the side door. No answer. He stepped back into the driveway, turned toward the house, cupped his hands at his mouth and called: "Amity!" Then he walked back to the sidewalk, faced the house, cupped hands at mouth and called: "Amity! Come out! I need you to go with me to look for Margery! I woke up this morning and she was gone!"

The house groaned some more and the wind huffed by. Gerald's best friend was evidently away, Tuesday notwithstanding. Gerald started walking back toward the overpass. He thought, though, that maybe he ought to try one more time. When he turned around, he saw in the front second-story window a pale hand release a faded, milk-stained curtain. The curtain swished back into place, and the room behind was hidden. Gerald lifted his arm toward the window, showing Amity the blank space. He turned and continued away.

It hurt and stung Gerald that Amity would not come out to help him. He did not know why she was frightened of him and his questions or why her love for Margery and himself should not drive her out onto the front porch and force her to ask what was wrong.

She'd been a bridesmaid, after all.

The wind chilled Gerald as he walked along Lewis, parallel to the expressway, past ramshackle businesses, plywood fronts, and Indiana limestone with kaleidoscope graffiti. Gerald made himself smile. If a bridesmaid lacked devotion, then perhaps a Maid of Honor and a Best Man would understand. Andrew and Adelpha, Gerald's brother and sister, lived just south in the East Village. He'd always helped them clean their rooms when they were out with their friends. At night, when the meal was finished, when Andrew washed the dishes and Adelpha rinsed, Gerald dried and put-away. The three had worked in the shop together for some years, and they had dozens if not hundreds of barbecues and fishing trips under their belts. The two had gone camping with Gerald and Margery, and together, the four had faced the bright and icy spray of Tahquamenon Falls. Andrew and Adelpha would come with him, wherever he ended up going.

Eventually, Gerald crossed into a neighborhood with larger yards and neater houses. He found his siblings' house and knocked on the front door. Andrew came to the door.

"Gerald," he said.

"Andrew," Gerald said. "She's gone." And Gerald showed his arm.

"So she is," Andrew said, and Adelpha came to stand at his side.

"Who is gone?" Adelpha asked.

Gerald showed his arm.

"Oh," said Adelpha.

"I'm going for her," Gerald said. "I'm going."

They waited, there, on the porch. The rain fell. Wind chimes shivered together, ringing softly. The porch swing moved back and forth.

"Are you coming back?" Andrew asked.

"I guess that depends on where I find her."

"No, Gerald," said Adelpha with a soft, comforting, honeyed voice. "No."

"Are you going to come back?" Andrew asked.

"Depends on when I find her," Gerald said.

But Adelpha shook her head.

"I need you to come with me," Gerald said.

More waiting.

"We can't go," said Andrew. His throat was tight. "I can't go, I mean."

"Why can't you come with me?"

"Because..."

"Because?"

"Because..."

"Yes?"

"There is a church banquet tomorrow night. There's a fundraiser for the Moose Lodge. And a meeting of Downtown Development. I have to go to all three. Someone has to show up with the coffee."

More waiting.

"Adelpha?" Gerald asked.

"Oh, Gerald," she said. "My knees. You know they're so weak. I have a hard enough time getting up and down those stairs. I couldn't make it past the first block, especially in this rain."

"But I can drive you!" said Gerald, his voice ragged. They looked at him. "I can buy you coffee to take tomorrow."

More waiting.

"You were my Best Man. Her Maid of Honor."

And waiting....

"My brother and sister!"

But Adelpha let go of the door's molding. She retreated into the small, white house, watching. And then Andrew receded, eyes cool and glassy. He gave a slight nod as he shut the door. Behind him, in the dark rooms of the house, the crowds cheered on *The Price is Right*. A cuckoo called out the time. The door shut.

* * *

Fine then. Fine then, Gerald thought. People grew old and

dissolved. Gerald knew that; he had watched it for over 60 years. But he held himself forth as proof of an exception. If his friends and family wouldn't accompany him, then he'd supply himself with all the necessary supplies. He'd head into the wilderness alone. He wouldn't stop looking for Margery. He wouldn't. He wouldn't. He wouldn't stop looking until she was there and their pinky fingers entwined.

Gerald continued on. He took the mossy path between the elms on the greenway, then walked along the close-cut grass of the Eastside where the stumps stuck up at even intervals. He crossed the expressway and followed the road as it wound down on a dusty margin past the milk bottling plant, the Best Western hotel, the post office, and, ultimately, toward the river. He entered the Farmers Market there. The green awning folded over him, and he found himself inside a long greenhouse with steamed windows converging in the distance. The space was packed thick with people: Moms and dads, children in strollers, and old women squeezing the fruit to test whether it was firm enough.

Gerald stood and breathed in and out. He went shopping:

The rutabagas, turnips, sprouting beets,
Cloudy full bags of chickens' feet and beef,
Tins of fishing grubs and strands of wheat,
Tomatoes swollen, wet potatoes, milk,
Cucumbers, bone white cloves of garlic, trout,
Bananas, rice, parsnips and oranges, pears,

Spaghetti, knotty mushrooms, knotty pears,
Wet cauliflower and carrots, salted beets,
Green peas, bell peppers, green peppers, smoked trout,
Rump roast, rib roast, flank steak, skirt steak, ground beef,
Black beans, wet cheddar, crackers and whole milk,
Pineapples, kiwi, coconut, dry wheat,

Dried oats and pumpernickel, rye and wheat,
Drowsy bran and wormholed fleshy pears,
Cranberries, peaches, onions, luscious milk,
Half milk, skim milk, Colby, vinegar beets,
Flanken-style ribs and bluegill, raw beef,

Branching broccoli stalks, heaving, gasping trout,
Whole and drawn and pan-dressed, vinegar, trout,
Cereal, corn, muffins, brownies, wheat,
Pumpkin pie, cake, steaming pink cuts of beef,
Cherry pie from Traverse city, pears,
Rhubarb pie, thick-shelled brown eggs, celery, beets,
Apple crisp, a bundt cake, cookies and milk,

Cauliflower, cabbage, eggplant, goat's milk,
Gourds and melons, veal, venison, trout,
Marshmallows and lemons, limes and red beets,
French bread, Italian bread, black bread and wheat,
Pumpkin, rhubarb, cherry, grapes, red pears,
Spinach, squash, brown sugar, perch and beef,

Turkey, walnuts, chicken, chestnuts, ham, beef,
Leeks, mace, snap peas, chick peas, cow's milk,
Red peppers, gooseberries, dates, flour, fat pears,
Pomegranate, meringue, sardines and trout,
Beer from barley, wine and bourbon and wheat,
Waxed beans, jellybeans and ambrosial beets.

A sandwich of beef and fillet of trout
With a cup of milk. A slice of bread, wheat.
A plateful of beets. A bowlful of pears.

Gerald was prepared.

Arms dripping sacks full of food and produce, he set off toward the river. The rain had stopped now, and the quilt of the clouds had been pulled back from overhead. Now a vague circle of the afternoon cast a bright haze through the translucent sheets overhead. Gerald reached the river. It was not quite so cold and steely looking as before.

But where do I go now? he wondered. A pigeon landed. "You can't take that with you."

Gerald stood and looked out at the muddy current rolling and roiling by. It was wet, and so he started to cry. He moved down. Sank to his knees. Let the bags drop from his hands. Beets

and pears rolled out onto the grass.

"You can't take that with you."

"Then what?"

"You can't take that with you."

"Then what can I take with me?"

"Dash against darkness."

"Where have I heard that before?"

"Dash against darkness."

"Fine."

Gerald stood again. He knew his eyes were red from crying. Some bicyclists rode past. He thought that they must be staring at him. He stared back. They rode past. They hadn't noticed him at all. Overhead, poplars rose and roared. The sky cleared further. Gerald didn't want to head out alone. But Margery had already left. He had to find her and nobody would come with him. He couldn't even take his beef and trout, pears and beets.

Fine, he thought. If it has to be, it has to be. Beets. Good-bye, beets.

And he continued along the river bank.

Fine then! he thought. I will find you, Margery! I will look and look and look until I find you, and then, my wife, we will hook our pinky fingers together and kiss.

* * *

But this morning: This morning Gerald had gotten up and noticed a peculiar lack of itching on his right arm. Strange, he'd thought. That arm's itched every morning for many years. Over 50 years. He looked at his arm. Just the night before it had displayed a tattoo: A lovely girl, 17 years old, dark hair, and pearls. She wore a pearl dress and cradled in her arms a beet and a pear. In a filigree above her crown was her name:

M a r g e r y

That was when he knew that she was somewhere; she was, and he just had to go and find her.

But he didn't want to go alone. It's frightening, seeking out one who has died, and he wasn't sure what he'd come upon going

on his own.

"So don't."

Gerald looked up and there he was, leaning against the nearest cottonwood. He was 20, perhaps. 30. 40. He'd never been a handsome man. He had sharp, serious, mournful gray eyes. Those eyes could turn eyes, sure. But his nose was too hawk-like, his ears too big and shellish. His hair, a mass of limp strands, lay damp with sweat, until he was 50, and then it fell off.

"You're me," Gerald said. "If you go with me, I'm still going alone. Besides, I take myself with me wherever I go."

"I guess that means you're never alone," Gerald said.

Gerald shrugged.

They continued along the river.

"What does this mean?" Gerald asked. "Is this death or something? Is this dying or something? Am I officially walking toward the white light?"

"Probably shouldn't think of it like that. But it isn't as gloomy as it was this morning. Look, the sun's coming out."

It had, through a pocket in the clouds. There were more pockets, gradually. Gerald and Gerald followed the river, and it turned like a snake, flat and languid back toward the milk bottling plant. They stopped under the shade of an apple tree. A cricket chirped nearby.

"This is where you must leave the others behind," said Gerald.

"What others?" asked Gerald. "Nobody came with me."

And then he realized he'd been mistaken.

Other Gerald's surrounded them.

Here was Gerald the Shop Worker, who welded and rigged and had trouble hearing his coworkers through the safety goggles that fit awkwardly over his head, folding the flaps of his heavy ears back against his head. This Gerald had heavy, rough hands that could tame sparks.

And here was Gerald the Church Member, who always thought that slacks and a sweater were good enough, even when Margery wore her spring dress and the two walked up the stairs like a rosebush with a hawthorn. But he was a good listener, that Gerald, and thoughtful.

And Uncle Gerald, a good listener like Church Gerald, but

a bit more patient and less judgmental. Not quite as serious and grim about the world.

Here were the ears of Gerald, half-asleep where he stood, half-ignoring the conversation around him.

Here were the eyes of Gerald, deep and soft and sharp and gray, constantly studying the changes in the world.

And here was Young Gerald. And Gerald's discretion, calmly listening on the phone to some catastrophe on the other end. Strong Gerald, carrying his father back up the basement stairs and cupping his bleeding skull so that blood didn't flow. This Gerald, the handsomest one, was sitting down by the river, this same river, admiring the fireflies on a steamy night in June. And a favorite, Gerald the Gardener, with hands full and rich and grainy with black earth.

"Will I find her?" Gerald asked.

"You're procrastinating!" they answered. "You're procrastinating!"

"But will I find her?" Gerald asked.

"Don't put it off," they answered.

"I just want to find her."

And waiting.

Clouds dissipated.

"Why can't you all come with me?"

"We can't. If you want to find Margery, you have to leave all this behind: the shop and the church and the kids and the garden. Your eyes your lips your ears your tongue. All go, all go. Leave gone go. You might as well go."

"Will I find her?"

"Your good looks and your strength and discretion. Your senses and your beauty and your moments and memories. You have to leave this all behind."

"Then how will I find Margery?"

"I'll help you find Margery," one said.

"Why do you get to come with me?"

"I'm you. How are you going to leave you behind?"

"It would seem I am leaving myself behind."

"No. None of them are you. They are all that is acquired and lost."

"What is acquired and lost?"

“Not what swells and grows together. Not what merges.”

The sun exploded from behind the clouds and entered an ocean of sky.

* * *

Gerald wandered the Eastside for many minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, and years. He walked from the brink of the curb of the projects on Atherton clear north to the slippery algae skim of the reservoir. Beef and trout. He took himself with him, and while things fluctuated and changed, while identity was never solid but sleek, shimmering, effervescent, floating, dissolving, bubbling, breaking, and bursting, he was never alone. He kept himself company. The conversation left something to be desired; Gerald was never a good conversationalist, and he kept his comments to a “yes” and a “no,” a grunt about the weather, or most often, anxiety at finding Margery. What would she be wearing? And would he look rough and uncouth as usual? Would she frown at him? She always hated when he was sloppy.

A few times, he asked others for directions: Shop owners, bicyclists, kids hanging on the corner. But gradually, day by day, Gerald realized he didn’t need directions, and whether he lost interest in these people or whether they stopped noticing him was something almost unconsidered.

In Kearsley Park, the sun drove west behind the expressway and factories. The stars came out over the huge vast pavilion with sets for *The Merchant of Venice* or *Timon of Athens*. Ice cream trucks chimed along a few blocks away and the hornets crawled along dropped cups of ice cream and honey. Milk.

Before dawn at Angelo’s Coney Island, the steamy dishwasher coffee cups stuck to the greasy tables, and the clock reflected off the window, floating phantom-like against the naked storefronts across the street. Backwards, upside-down numbers hovered on the cratered parking lot. Wheat.

September had become August somehow.

One bright morning day, Gerald was walking along the bank of the river and a pigeon alighted.

“I don’t have any bread for you,” he said. It was the first thing he’d said in weeks. The pigeon picked about, curious.

Gerald listened for Gerald's reply. But Gerald didn't reply. And then he realized he was gone. Nowhere. Something had ceased to be, he thought. Or maybe, he wondered, though he scarcely dared to hope, something had merged, just as Gerald had said. The sun set somewhere, and August was becoming something else. Gerald thought he saw beets poking up from the ground and pears dripping from above.

Is this? he wondered, less than a voice. To his surprise, his arm tingled with a needle's pressure, and then a voice answered:

"There you are, at last!" she said. "Are you ready?"

The Launch

Where do you think you're going? we ask
our father. Humoring him like a child as
he swaps slippers by the door for leather shoes.
Tying laces, he says, *I'm going back to China*

on foot. For him, a walk from Massachusetts,
North America to Guangdong, Asia—likely
as a team of seven men and women circling
Jupiter. A self-proclaimed national hero,

over television and dishwashing clatter, Father tells
his truths: How he wrestled a mugger this morning
while we lazy kids weren't even awake, how
as a child he broke into sweats gathering switches

for the stove, tiptoeing around explosive fields.
At dinner, we watch him eat. Each emptied bowl
applauded. Every child's name he recalls is celebrated,
respite from hunting generous checks he writes

against empty accounts to neighbors and relatives.
It's best he sees what he sees, instead of the old man
he met that day he lost his footing while standing
on the subway as it jerked into motion. His eyes teared,

not from embarrassment, but from weak-boned age,
its nasty stare and bullying shove. That day, we looked
away, pretended not to see, and now we all choose
what we want to see. Look, there's Dad, light-years aloft,

shuttling fast away from the body's estrangement,
breathing in measured allotments of lucidity. Good
blue world, we wave like land lovers sending off a ship
until our bodies begin their own fish leaps into orbit.

Untitled

He felt the autumn breeze behind his old Honda's windshield. He glanced toward his left and decided to roll down the driver's side window. The wind was pressing to be felt, not by deduction but through the actual sensation of touch. Feelings couldn't be imitated, he learned through his years. The single-lane highway seemed to stretch out beyond the horizon, broken only by the occasional roll of a gentle hill. He felt the wind coming in and around his outstretched hand. And for a second, he smiled. For himself, for once. He pondered for a bit and then whispered beneath his breath while squinting at the sun. Then he laughed. The world was never much of an audience.

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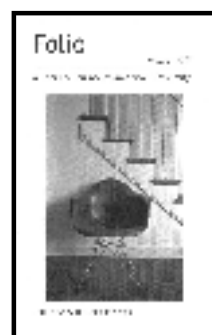
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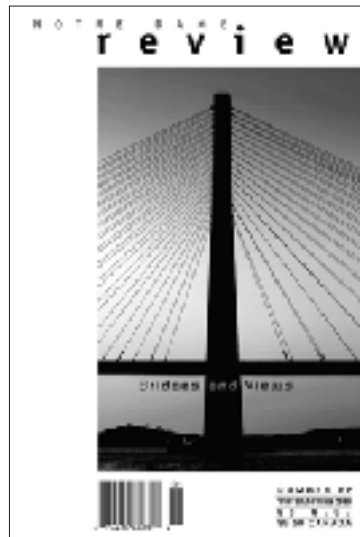
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